

PERFORMING A SOCIAL MOVEMENT:
THEATER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE'S COLLECTIVE STORYTELLING

by

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Date May 20, 2020

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in
Teachers College, Columbia University

2020

ABSTRACT

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There is widespread agreement among researchers, policy experts, and community advocates that the United States' mass incarceration system is a policy failure. Despite bipartisan consensus and sporadic reform attempts, the policies and systems ravaging low-income families and communities of color remain largely intact. Formerly incarcerated people have been driving the social movement to dismantle mass incarceration since the movement's inception, yet their advocacy efforts and creation of alternative programmatic and policy approaches have only recently been acknowledged and documented and have yet to be implemented widely.

Through this study, I aimed to fill these gaps in knowledge about the advocacy work of women impacted by the justice system by documenting the ethos, practices, and strategies of Theater for Social Change (TSC), a performance arts-based advocacy group composed of formerly incarcerated women in service of justice system transformation.

Using action research methodology, I employed dialogic and iterative processes, in partnership with TSC, to develop interview and focus group protocols and analyze data. I also undertook a thematic analysis of post-performance audience discussions, as well as the scenes and monologues created by the ensemble over the years.

This research project found that the *ensemble way of working*—defined by Radosavljević (2013) as “collective, creative, and collaborative”—enabled TSC to develop and model the type of caring and self-organized community and capacity development, per Nixon et al. (2008), that they envision for currently and formerly incarcerated women and their families and communities to create conditions for a just and equitable society. The ensemble way of working nurtured a sisterhood and enabled the exploration of individual and shared experiences of the trauma of incarceration, as well as overcoming systemic inequalities through higher education and career success in a safe and supportive space. Performing scenes and monologues developed from personal stories allows TSC to control its advocacy messages, challenge stereotypes, and create new narratives about the worth of formerly incarcerated people. Theater and post-performance discussions also enable ensemble members to model and employ their multilevel expertise: personal experience navigating the justice system; professional expertise in reentry, mental health and human services; and advocacy leadership.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. I am particularly grateful to the unconditional love and unending support that my parents, Janice and Donald, have given me every step of the way. Without you, I never would have accomplished this dissertation. Second, to my son, Julien, who patiently allowed me to focus on my many years of research and writing. You are my inspiration for completing this work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my committee members for the generosity of your time and insights in guiding me throughout this dissertation journey. I offer special thanks to Professors Hope Jensen Leichter and Susan P. Sturm. You went above and beyond in engaging deeply with this project and challenging me to stretch my intellect and employ the rigor that this project requires and deserves. I am also thankful to Professor Kathy Boudin for seizing the opportunity to join my dissertation committee in the midst of developing and directing multiple programs at the Center for Justice.

Second, I am grateful to Robert Kennedy for the many years of patience, editing, feedback, and discussion while I was deep in the doctoral studies and dissertation process. I would not have completed this project without your support and sacrifice. I remain in awe of your editing, writing, intellectual, and analytical skills. You have many talents and I was very fortunate that you shared them with me during this multi-year process. I know you will take your creativity and intellectual gifts to new heights.

Third, I wish to thank College and Community Fellowship's former and current staff for supporting me through this lengthy process.

Finally, I extend my deepest appreciation to each member of the Theater for Social Change, Barbara Martinsons, and former Artistic Director Beth for trusting me to interpret the legacy of your powerful ensemble from an academic point of view. You opened your hearts and minds and made yourselves vulnerable for this research project. It is my hope that our collaboration contributes to an understanding that creative expression and self-advocacy are vital to fulfilling human dignity and creating a just world.

T. B. A.

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Chapter I

PERFORMING A LIFE JOURNEY:

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF THE THEATER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The Theater for Social Change (TSC) ensemble has a gift for taking their audiences on a personal journey along with the ensemble members. When a member speaks, we see the journey through her eyes, and, through her monologue, she can compress the experience of a lifetime into several minutes. The following monologue, “Three Names,” performed as part of one of TSC’s shows, illustrates the ensemble member’s ability to employ powerful imagery to present a complex story succinctly.

SISTER X: I’ve had three names.

LINDA: Yo, S!

SISTER X: “S” was my street name, my mean streets of Harlem name. They called me “S” because we were in fast mode, the whole hustle and bustle of using-selling-ducking from the police mode. No one had time to say “Siiisstahhhh X,” no way. “Yo S!” There wasn’t time for a whole name.

ALL: Yo S!

LINDA: On the count!

SISTER X: My second name was a little longer, but you still had to say it fast.

TATARIA: Male officer on the unit!

SISTER X: 98G-0032. You never forget that number. In 1998, I was the 32nd woman to hit state ground.

Arlene walks downstage to Sister X. Ensemble relaxes stance out of count pose.

ARLENE: Excuse me. I'm looking for Professor X?

SISTER X: (To audience.) Now that's music to my ears. Working during the day, going to school at night, led me to an adjunct professor post.

(To Arlene.) Professor X. What's your name?

Sister X's trajectory shifts radically once she enters higher education. She transforms identities from drug dealer, to incarcerated woman, to college graduate, and then to adjunct professor. Her identity shifts as the environment and institutions within which she navigates her life—the “mean streets of Harlem,” state prison, and higher education—change. When Sister X performs “Three Names,” her body language changes to reflect the youthful energy of street life, then the crushing weight of a prison sentence, and, finally, pride at introducing herself as professor. Each name represents a different leg of Sister X's life journey. We learn in the audience discussion after the performance that Sister X has three master's degrees and is now a mental health professional.

At the end of many of the performances of *The Letters Behind My Name*, a script which includes the “Three Names” monologue, Sister X and her fellow TSC performers introduce themselves, proudly listing the letters behind each ensemble member's name:

LINDA: Linda Faye, Master of Social Work.

DENISE: It's walking into a classroom again for the first time in 33 years.
Denise, Bachelor's of Science.

CHERYL: I earned my degree in prison, now I teach at Columbia University.
Cheryl, Master's of Science.

SISTER X: Sister X, BA, MA, MS, MSW.

One of the performers punctuates the piece with the final declaration:

TATARIA: Our beginnings have been established, and our end is nowhere in sight.

Then the entire ensemble clasps hands, lifts them triumphantly in the air, and takes a bow.

Once again, the TSC ensemble uses words sparingly to illustrate the profound link between accomplishing higher education under challenging conditions and forging a life course of aspirations and hope. Lives once seemingly truncated by prison sentences and an institution that strips people of human dignity and agency are now full of possibilities. An “end nowhere in sight” has been unlocked by higher education and involvement in a theater group that allows others to bear witness to these remarkable personal transformations.

TSC is a Harlem-based performance ensemble comprised of 12¹ formerly incarcerated women who employ theater as a tool to share their personal stories of suffering, healing, empowerment, and transformation. Their choice to perform as an ensemble reflects their values and commitments to each other as a sisterhood. According to theater practitioner and scholar Duška Radosavljević (2013), the term *ensemble* implies a “way of working” (p. xi) that delineates an ensemble’s emphasis on its collective identity and its process. The TSC ensemble generates its scripts collaboratively, using improvisational and other theater techniques for developing

¹ TSC has had many of the same core ensemble members since about 2008, but the precise number of TSC members has changed over time, depending on the availability of the women to be active in the theater group. At the beginning of this study in 2016, there were 12 ensemble members, 11 of whom participated in this study. One ensemble member became inactive in this study by the time the research phase concluded in 2019.

performance content. Theater practitioners and scholars refer to this method of generating material as *collective creation* or *devised theater* (Syssoyeva & Proudfit, 2013).

In line with the core principles of collective creation, TSC prioritizes the group's shared artistic vision and decision-making partnership over the traditional theater group arrangement of a single playwright or director having sole responsibility for the artistic vision and/or organizational aspects of the group (Syssoyeva & Proudfit, 2013).

Furthermore, its scenes, poetry, and monologues, which are based on ensemble members' biographies, are always integrated into each performance; a TSC performance is a performance of a collective identity rather than a singular life story. TSC's structure as an ensemble and employment of collective creation of material is both process- and outcomes-oriented. TSC co-creates its material and makes decisions as an ensemble on how, what, and where it will perform.

TSC can also be understood as community-based theater. The ensemble emerged from College and Community Fellowship (CCF), a New York City-based nonprofit organization that provides women who have histories of criminal justice involvement with financial, academic, and social supports, as well as leadership development and skills building, in order to help them succeed in their pursuit of higher education and careers (Sturm & Nixon, October 2015). All of TSC's members are CCF alumnae, having personally experienced self-empowerment through educational success and advocacy. The ensemble members' life experiences, with education as one of the key turning points in their trajectories, are the subject of some of TSC's scenes, as Sister X's "Three Names" monologue demonstrates. The women of TSC share their personal experiences of surviving the trauma of imprisonment and finding their voices and identities through

higher education in a variety of ways: speaking at criminal justice reform conferences; advocating for humane and just criminal legal system policies; working as reentry and mental health professionals; and writing articles, editorials, and poetry. They engage in these pursuits regularly within their personal, advocacy, and professional lives. They come together as a theater ensemble to participate in a profound collective artistic experience with a shared purpose that complements and augments their other professional and social change activities and roles.

TSC's *raison d'être*, to promote social change, is rooted in its identities as part of a movement led by formerly incarcerated people to transform the criminal justice system. Per CCF's website, TSC "raises public awareness and advocates for change" (College and Community Fellowship, "Theater for Social Change Ensemble" section, para. 2). It performs personal stories collectively in order to provide a human face for the pervasive social, economic, and political consequences of mass incarceration and the punitive turn that the U.S. criminal justice system has taken over the last four decades. TSC's objective is to employ these personal stories of transformation to support the movement to replace the punitive system of mass incarceration with a rehabilitative, just, and humane system that enables its communities to develop the skills and opportunities to thrive.

Research Problem

TSC ensemble members came of age and were deeply affected by the growth of the policing and prison system in the 1980s and 1990s, policies that led to what is commonly known today as the era of mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010; Clear, 2007; Drucker, 2011; Wacquant, 2002). A stark statistic about the United States' massive

correctional system is often cited by political and advocacy leaders across the political spectrum: the United States, with less than 5% of the world's population, has a prison and jail system that accounts for 25% of the world's incarcerated people. This statistic reflects a correctional system that is widely viewed as out of control in terms of its costs, both fiscally, to U.S. taxpayers, and in human lives (Collier, October 2014). Criminologist Bruce Western (2018) called the beginning of the system's expansion in the 1970s "a strange new experiment in public policy. After using incarceration sparingly, like in other Western democracies, the U.S. justice system began to send people convicted of crimes to prison in vast numbers" (p. 1).

Long before mass incarceration's effects became mainstream knowledge, women impacted by mass incarceration and their allies were writing and speaking of their invisibility, their dehumanization, and their lack of agency in multiple dimensions of their personal and community lives and within the larger social structure that constrains them (Davis, 1997; Richie, 2012; Sudbury, 2005). Racial, economic, and social injustices impact low-income women of color in ways that are not experienced by men of color or White women (Richie, Freudenberg, & Page, 2001). Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) described the legal and social implications of the interconnecting gender and racial facets of Black women's lived experiences that resulted in their unique experience (albeit often unrecognized or acknowledged by others) of discrimination, in a framework she called *intersectionality*. Criminal justice system researchers and theorists have added another dimension to the intersectionality paradigm by pointing to the challenging or harrowing experiences of justice-involved women of color (e.g., trying to make ends meet in low-income neighborhoods, surviving violence and trauma, navigating a host of

public institutions and services) before, during, and after prison that need to be elevated in consideration of justice system policy reform (Chesney-Lind, 2002; Richie, 1996; Sudbury, 2005).

Today, there is widespread political and social awareness that the punishment system that gave rise to the largest incarcerated population in the world's history constitutes a massive public policy failure (Alexander, 2010; Clear & Frost, 2014; Davis, 2003; Drucker, 2018). This radical shift in public and political consciousness was a result of decades of organizing, advocacy, and research efforts within and from outside of prison (Gilmore & Kilgore, 2019). However, resistance to mass incarceration and community-led and multisector coalition-building responses aimed at challenging the normalization of the punitive criminal justice system are still not widely visible. These responses are at the heart of the social movement that coalesced around dismantling the punitive policies that have led to mass incarceration,² as I show in Chapter III.

Despite this growing mainstream recognition that this system is unjust and destructive to low-income families of color and their communities, government and policymakers have yet to make substantive policy changes that have led to a significant decline in the U.S. prison population. Many aspects of these punitive justice system policies are still intact (Drucker, 2018), and surveilling and managing populations through community supervision continues to take away the liberties, freedoms, and opportunities of people of color (Miller & Alexander, 2016). Advocates, researchers, and

² Examples of formerly incarcerated people-led organizations and advocacy include: Critical Resistance, co-founded in 1997, as a coalition between currently and formerly incarcerated people, advocates, academics, policymakers, and labor, faith-based, and community leaders (History of Critical Resistance, 2000); Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions, founded in 2003, as a policy, advocacy, leadership development, and training center run by and for people directly impacted by mass incarceration (Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions, "NuLeadership is Formed" section).

activists focusing on mass incarceration's impact call the practices and policies that continue to punish formerly incarcerated people after they finish their sentences and come home with *collateral consequences of mass incarceration*. The criminal justice system's punitive turn in the 1980s led to a web of policies preventing formerly incarcerated people from accessing public benefits and housing, student loans, driver's licenses, and certain employment licenses; being able to vote; maintaining parental rights; and systematic discrimination against people with criminal records in employment hiring practices, to name a few (Chin, 2017; Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2002; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019).

Research has shown that community-led responses and programs, specifically those staffed and run by formerly incarcerated people, are effective and empowering in the face of the collateral consequences of mass incarceration, yet they still remain on the margins of mainstream and wide-ranging practices, investments, and policy changes. Formerly incarcerated people have founded a number of organizations, such as JustLeadershipUSA (JLUSA), Families for Justice as Healing, and All of Us or None, to advocate for policy change (Sturm & Tae, 2017). TSC is an example of a community-based arts collective whose mission is to advocate for criminal justice policy change. By performing their participants' life journeys, TSC celebrates their achievements and community while educating the public about the obstacles they overcame before, during, and after prison.

In response to the ongoing challenges to dismantle a criminal justice system that has been deemed a failure, and the gaps in knowledge about the tireless work of people directly impacted by mass incarceration to reimagine a just system, I identified two

interconnected opportunities that I take up in this dissertation. First, I intend to make a contribution to the field of study of community arts-based social movement work by documenting the ethos, practices, and strategies of a theater-based advocacy group composed of formerly incarcerated women in service of the criminal justice system and policy transformation. Second, I aim to add to a growing body of literature and practitioner work that demonstrate the power and efficacy of community-led strategies and practices that liberate and empower formerly incarcerated women to live out their hopes and dreams in the face of and in opposition to mass incarceration and its accompanying collateral consequences of mass incarceration.

TSC's advocacy mission is to educate the public on criminal justice system policies that continue to punish people after they return home from prison, in order to expand the movement to end punitive criminal justice system policies. To quote one of the earliest anti-prison activists, Angela Davis, during her keynote speech at the University of Michigan's 2020 MLK Symposium, "Black women are really the great unsung heroes" (YouTube, 1:17:10) of social movements. Davis was referring to the women who organized the Montgomery bus boycott that served as a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement, but she spoke of all freedom and anti-oppression movements as an extension of the civil rights and anti-racism movements. Davis also acknowledged that visual culture has been a rich medium for challenging mass incarceration, and this study was designed to contribute to our collective understanding of how and why visual culture--specifically ensemble theater—as advocacy is meaningful to TSC and effective as a social change strategy.

Writing a decade ago, Tapia (2010) contended that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women were largely hidden from mainstream public consciousness and policy views, which, as Chesney-Lind (2002) argued, rendered their needs invisible once they were in contact with the criminal justice system. Women have consistently represented a smaller percentage of the incarcerated population, thereby further marginalizing them and their needs and experiences as unseen or insignificant:

Women offenders have largely been invisible or “forgotten” by a criminology that emerged to complement, explain, and occasionally critique state efforts to control and discipline unruly and dangerous men. In the classic texts on crime, women literally “disappeared” from data sets, from discussions of crime patterns, and...from plans regarding the structure of jails and prisons.... [This] laid the foundation for a policy and programmatic crisis, as the number of women sentenced to jail and prison began to increase dramatically in the last two decades of the 20th century. (p. 79)

Lawston (2011) argued that the absence of incarcerated women’s self-representation in mass media resulted in a mainstream society that was profoundly unaware of how women “conceptualize and process imprisonment and the separation from their communities and families, and how they express dissent and fight for their voices to be heard...” (p. 4). This lack of awareness had, in part, enabled the public sector to allocate very few gender-specific resources and services to women and their families during their incarceration and when they returned home (Chesney-Lind, 2002).

Lawston (2011) explored how popular media relied on tropes that presented justice-involved women monolithically, conjuring up stereotypes that depicted them as violent or deviant. Justice-involved women’s lives, when represented solely by their conflicts with the law, permitted their:

crimes and the stigma of criminality to overshadow, and to act as a master status quo to, all other aspects of their identities. These media representations fail to contextualize women’s imprisonment within a social system that relies on racism,

economic discrimination, and sexism to lock up marginalized groups of women who are our mothers, sisters, wives, partners, and friends. (p. 4)

The artistic expression of justice-involved women, per Lawston (2011), provides a means of enabling self-representation as well as challenging the one-dimensional and narrow definitions and understanding of justice-involved women's identities. These "gaps in the discourse" must be filled by "creative and dynamic practices of expression, activism, and stringent social critique among incarcerated women, formerly incarcerated women, and their allies" (Tapia, 2010, p.2).

Artistic expression and education that foster critical and creative thinking, or "social imagination," are TSC's *modus operandi*. According to Maxine Greene (1995), social imagination provides us with

the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets, where we live, in our schools. As I write of social imagination, I am reminded of Jean-Paul Sartre's declaration that "it is on the day that we can conceive of a different state of affairs that a new light falls on our troubles and our suffering and when we decide that these are unbearable." (p. 5)

TSC performs its "visions of what should be and what might be": a "different state of affairs" that enables women access to the conditions and resources they need to develop their abilities, to drive their dreams, and to nurture others to join them on their path of developing self-determination, self-love, and self-efficacy. TSC is more than aspirational, and the members do more than simply envision what could or should be. They are also witnesses to and documenters of their struggles and achievements, personally, professionally, and politically, in their journeys of reentry from prison into their families and communities.

Research Objectives and Questions

A primary goal of this dissertation research was to demonstrate the power, meaning, and purpose of participating in the TSC ensemble for members personally. I also investigated how theater is a vehicle for TSC, socially and politically, in order to share the members' personal stories of overcoming obstacles, working towards their aspirations, and celebrating their accomplishments during and after their incarceration. This project also set out to explore why this type of community-based artistic expression is valuable for women whose lives have been profoundly impacted by the criminal justice system, as well as to explore why structural violence, education, aspirations, and leadership are among the key themes about which they write and perform.

The ensemble's name, Theater for Social Change, is also a term used loosely for a genre of theater. Sarah Thornton (2015), founding Artistic Director for a UK-based theater company Collective Encounters, wrote that the term is not widely recognized or utilized by theater practitioners or academics, mainly because there is no consistent definition or set of practices that delineate it. While TSC did not intentionally choose a name that is also an informal genre, it is not a coincidence. Thornton (2015) described a framework for Theatre for Social Change (TfSC) as a genre, which resonates strongly with the Theater for Social Change (TSC) ensemble. She outlined five characteristics that frame TfSC—intentionality, community, hyphenation, conscientization, and aesthetics—that I discuss throughout this study. Importantly, TSC can also be understood through this TfSC frame:

- drawing from its own heightened consciousness and creating awareness of unjust systems and policies with the aim of taking action to change the world (*conscientization*);
- commitment to the shared goals of transforming the justice and education systems (*intentionality*);
- a sisterhood of formerly incarcerated leaders and professionals who identify with each other's trauma, transformation, and striving (*community*);
- its members inhabiting multiple worlds and identities to form a collective identity (*hyphenation*); and
- employment of collective creation, also known in the theater world as devising, that enables the performance of collective and multiple voices in the form of an ensemble (*aesthetics*).

First, TSC's aesthetics—the ensemble performance and material generated through collective creation based on personal stories—reflect and support TSC's ethos, identity, and goal of informing a social movement to dismantle mass punishment. Duška Radosavljević's (2013) framing of the *ensemble way of working* as an ethos that is “collective, creative and collaborative” (p. 11) is very much in line with TSC's way of working. The ensemble way of working overlaps with collective creation, as collective creation is similarly a process- and ethics-oriented approach; many ensembles employ collective creation methods precisely because the ethos is aligned with their non-hierarchal values. Syssoyeva (2013) shared what she has found to be the underlying ideological commitments fueling practitioners of collective creation:

Collective creation has often constituted a kind of polemic-in-action against prior methodologies that the [theater] group has known: an investigation, a reinvigoration, a challenge, an overthrow. The...oppressive structure, if you will, that the group perceives itself to be challenging through the generation of a new methodology may be aesthetic, institutional, interpersonal, societal, economic, political, ethical, or some admixture thereof. (p. 6)

TSC has made methodological decisions and principled choices driven by its commitment to each other and the collective's well-being and empowerment and its drive to educate audiences about and make visible for them: (a) the invisible consequences of mass incarceration; (b) the structural violence and inequalities that women face before, during, and after their incarceration; (c) the transformative power of education; and (d) advocacy efforts to develop policy and practice that enable people with histories of justice involvement to achieve their goals and dreams and to realize their potential. In this project, I explore with TSC in depth how its *polemic-in-action*, per Syssoyeva (2013), models the type of social, educational, and cultural conditions and relations that it envisions for currently and formerly incarcerated women specifically, and for communities of color more broadly. In this study, I speak to the ways in which ensemble members engage in critical consciousness development that has led them to generate, define, and articulate their own theories, strategies, and solutions for a just and equitable world.

Researcher's Positionality and the Qualitative Research Process

Critical theorists have placed a glaring spotlight on the injustices that populations farthest from the centers of power (e.g., higher education, mainstream media, the private sector, and government) have experienced when their knowledges, expertise, and cultures have been suppressed and co-opted by those in power (Foucault, 1980; hooks, 1990). I

approached this research project as an equal partnership between the researcher (myself) and TSC so that it would not reproduce academia's predisposition to speak for people who historically have been denied self-representation. If I, as a researcher writing from a position of privilege, claimed to be able to speak on TSC's behalf, I would be reproducing the exploitation and objectification of women with criminal histories that are already rife in the White privilege discourses that have dominated academia and myriad other spaces in our society, where the unequal distribution of power is deeply rooted. My positionality (i.e., White, middle-class woman, affiliated with a prestigious university, and with no past involvement with the justice system) speaks to how my identity and social location shape the research process and outcomes, specifically with respect to power and privilege, thus influencing my relationship with my research subjects and how I relate, interpret, and present their narratives and biographies.

bell hooks (1990) wrote about the marginalization she experienced through White feminist academics' use of the discourse of the "Other." Speaking in the voice of these academics and their position of privilege and dominance, hooks introduced the subtext of this discourse:

'No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know *your story* [emphasis added]. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. *Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority* [emphasis added]. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.' (p. 208)

In speaking about and for those who they have positioned as the "Other," the colonizer/oppressor relegates hooks and the other women of color encountered within and outside of the academy to the margins, i.e., to the far periphery of power and control

of epistemology, resources, hegemony, institutions and systems, language, and so on. hooks called attention to how those in power appropriate the stories of marginalized people, an appropriation which can be extended to their identities, autonomy, bodies, voice, self-representation, memory, history, and agency, and she sets up the space of center/margins and relations of subject/object as a binary.

In the same article, hooks spoke of those who operate from a place of privilege and the “authority” voice at the center, challenging them from her own place of defiance at the perimeter:

This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality as a site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. (p. 209)

hooks’ vantage point from her “space in the margin” allows her to see new possibilities of ways of knowing, relating, and being. From this space of possibility, hooks invites the privileged to make two radical shifts that will result in dismantling the power relations that have relegated hooks to an object of study rather than the subject of her own story. First, given that hooks reimagined/recreated margins as spaces of inclusiveness rather than of exclusion, she beckons the colonizer to shed her position as oppressor and to imagine herself as being in “solidarity” with hooks. The binary is obliterated. The colonizer sheds herself of her privilege, and in ridding herself of this privilege, she is liberated; the colonized sheds herself of being an object, and she, too, is liberated (“we recover ourselves”). Second, the space becomes one of freedom and resistance, and of collaboration and dialogue on equal terms (“let us meet there”). I sought to meet TSC in this space of resistance, on equal terms, where we could exercise praxis in solidarity and engage in dialogue as peers.

I find resonance with Ruby C. Tapia's (2010) "call to action" to end the violence and injustices perpetrated by "women's imprisonment and the social conditions that produce it" (p. 3). Tapia sees her role and responsibility as an *ally*, i.e., someone who has not been directly affected by the criminal justice system, but who is driven to join the call to action to dismantle "the mechanisms and circumstances of dehumanization that mark the women's prison..." (p. 1). I likewise use the term *ally* as a way to explain my relationship to the movement for decarceration and the transformation of the structural violence that has impacted generations of people in the United States and throughout the world. Alliance is another way in which I relate to TSC.

I also want to highlight Tapia's (2010) conclusion that allies must approach this work with honesty, self-awareness, and humility: "To believe that any of us can fully render this picture for ourselves or for anyone else" (p. 1) is spurious. We can, however, make a commitment to liberating each other from the binaries—oppressed/oppressor, slave/master, incarcerated/free, impoverished/wealthy, uneducated/educated, and so on—that have historically stripped us of our humanity. hooks believed that, through love and compassion, we will create liberated relationships free from these schisms.

To ground these theoretical concepts of positionality in more concrete terms, I turn to reflections on my own life story. When I returned to graduate school to pursue my Master of Education degree at Teachers College, which led me to pursue a doctorate in the same program, I considered myself fairly familiar with aspects of critical theory, thanks to my undergraduate and master's degree studies. I had been introduced to gender, race, media, and cultural, urban, and ethnic studies as an undergraduate and during my first master's degree. Throughout these studies, I reflected often on my racial, gender,

and ethnic identity, as well as the privilege of my middle-class upbringing and education, in relation to texts, the authors, my peers, and professors.

It took me some time to realize that the conceptualization of my identity and positionality was abstract, more of an intellectual exercise that allowed me to depersonalize my privilege. This became clear during a sociology of education class that I took towards the end of my master's degree. Good sociologists pull out the threads of collective stories that are deeply embedded in our social history, institutions, and structures, and then reintegrate those threads back into the overarching story. As each thread is added back, the collective story becomes more diverse, dense, and pluralistic. While I do not remember the precise readings of the class, I recall the threads. We studied American policies and practices that fostered racial, economic, and ethnic segregation in U.S. cities and regions, and examined how educational inequality helped shape, and was shaped by, this segregation. One of the articles we read for the class spoke specifically about White flight from New York City in the 1970s and 1980s. I was very familiar with the narrative of White people fleeing a decaying city (*the Bronx was burning, after all*) for the suburban safe havens that wrapped around the city, but were set apart by bridges, tunnels, highways, and waterways. One of the threads within this larger narrative was the anxiety that middle-class White parents had about sending their children to NYC public schools, which at the time had a reputation for being dangerous and hopeless places where learning was scant. These parents made the decision to relocate to the "greener pastures" of the suburbs where the local tax base could support high-achieving and well-resourced schools.

As I read this collective narrative of White flight enticed by the promise of high-achieving schools that took place in the NYC tristate area and other regions around the United States, I saw my story, right there, in black and white. My parents were both from Queens; my father's socioeconomic context was middle-class, while my mother grew up in poverty. They both went to Queens public high schools, then public colleges; then my father went to an Ivy League graduate school. When I was 9 months old, my parents made an assessment that the local schools were unsafe and subpar, so they relocated to one of the newer, affordable suburbs with an excellent school district. Their investment paid off; my brother and I graduated from Ivy League colleges. I was part of this collective history, and I saw my demographic profile and story thread embedded within the sociology books.

On a larger scale, when many White families fled NYC, they took their middle-class tax base and resources with them. There was another thread in this story: the low-income families of color who could not afford to move away from the crime and the violence. They were abandoned during White flight and had no choice but to send their children to the local schools, the very schools that made my parents decide they needed to uproot. They did the best that they could under the circumstances, and their children suffered through the education system or had to leave without graduating. Along with low-performing schools, many communities faced violence, over-policing, poor housing quality, and mass incarceration.

Years later, I recalled this sociological story during an interview with Cheryl, one of the TSC ensemble members. As I discuss later, she spoke of the life-changing impact that taking a sociology college class while she was incarcerated at Bedford Hills

Correctional Facility had on her self-conception and her life trajectory. She read about inequality and poverty, and, for the first time, made the connection to growing up in poverty in the South Bronx where violence was prevalent, at a time when her single mother needed to rely on public benefits to get by. Once she started her deep dive into sociology, Cheryl looked back and saw clearly that she went to underfunded and under-resourced schools and understood why she did not graduate from high school.

These differences in how my and Cheryl's families were able to respond to similar external conditions show the differences in how the intersection of our races, classes, gender, and so on impacted our life trajectories and our identities. Within higher education, we both found the opportunities to situate our life stories within sociological literature, further highlighting the racial, spatial, and class differences, among other aspects of our identities and family dynamics, that propelled us towards different futures. Those differences divided us until Cheryl's life changed course as a result of her access to higher education. It was after she launched her new life path that her and my paths crossed.

I came to this research project with an understanding on an intellectual and material level of what my privilege meant. I knew that my expertise was limited to the realm of the academic and practitioner. I knew that I had to listen deeply and exercise humility. I was also committed to a process of establishing trust with the TSC ensemble. Most importantly, I wanted to establish a continuous dialogue to open up opportunities to work out any conflicts, differences of perspective, and times when I was unaware that I might be asserting my privilege or shutting down conversation. As I discuss in Chapter IV, this process was, in fact, most robust and fruitful during what would be considered

pre-dissertation research, a time during which I was engaging in relationship building with ensemble members; discussing research ideas at formal and informal meetings; and accompanying them to performances where they would engage in informal reflection on the performances, ensemble member relationships, and group dynamics. Once the formal research project commenced, engaging in ongoing dialogue was much more difficult because of how busy ensemble members became; they met less frequently, and then the group took a hiatus.

Overview of Research Design and Methodology

I return to Thornton's (2015) employment of *conscientization* as one of the tenets of TfSC. Developing critical awareness, or, to use the term I prefer, critical consciousness, is predicated upon engaging in *praxis*, per Freire (1970), "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 51). Praxis is simultaneously a theory, method, and practice. I see the ensemble way of working and the polemic-in-action of collective creation as similarly synthesizing theory, method, and practice. Freire knew well what Appadurai (2006) expressed many years later:

Research is normally seen as a high-end, technical activity, available by training and class background to specialists in education, the sciences and related professional fields. It is rarely seen as a capacity with democratic potential, much less as belonging to the family of rights.... It is worth regarding research as a right, albeit of a special kind. This argument requires us to recognize that research is a specialised name for a generalised capacity, the capacity to make disciplined inquiries into those things we need to know, but do not know yet. All human beings are, in this sense, researchers, since all human beings make decisions that require them to make systematic forays beyond their current knowledge horizons. (p. 167)

Appadurai called for the right to research for global populations whose educational levels do not go beyond elementary school, but his focus on the right to gather knowledge

systematically and to produce new knowledge resonates within the U.S. context. Within the United States, research has been historically reserved for elite institutions or resource-rich organizations and programs. It can and has been reframed by practitioners of action research and participatory action research as a participatory process owned and undertaken by those who have typically been studied, catalogued, and written about as objects. Being the objects of research can be dehumanizing and takes away self-articulation, self-determination, and agency.

TSC is essentially employing its own version of praxis and participatory action research to create new knowledges about the social conditions/structures and agency in the members' own lives. Using the devices of collective creation/devising and community dialogue, they enact the themes and newly created collective knowledges in their scripts and perform them on stage. Throughout this research project, I explore and analyze this space created by TSC's collective creation and collective community, a space that shares the characteristics of the space of liberation and resistance of which hooks wrote. Moreover, as I wrote earlier, if I engaged in a research project that positioned TSC members as objects of research and myself as the "expert" or "knowledge-holder/generator" (thus creating hierarchies and binaries) rather than as equal partners, I would be violating the principles of praxis, hooks' liberatory space, and collective creation. It would also yield false research outcomes because TSC consists of the experts on their lived experiences and the impact of structural violence on women of color.

What these theater, pedagogical, and research approaches have in common is that they are participatory methods of engaging in art making and in theory and knowledge

generation, and they emphasize processes and principles of equal partnership and collaboration. Therefore, for this project I employed a research methodology—action research—that is predicated on the same principles of participatory and egalitarian processes and practices. Carr (2006) argued that action research is, at its core, a mode of inquiry rather than a methodology, a mode committed to “open conversation” (p. 430) and dialogue within a community of practitioners in order to improve praxis, in the Aristotelian sense. According to Carr, Aristotle’s understanding of praxis

is not to make or produce some object or artefact, but progressively to realise the idea of the ‘good’ constitutive of a morally worthwhile form of human life.... *Praxis* is a form of ‘doing’ action precisely because its ‘end’—to promote the good life—only exists, and can only be realised, in and through *praxis* itself.... (p. 426)

Praxis, collective creation, community dialogue, and action research have in common an emphasis on process, one that is participatory and egalitarian, and that models the types of social relations and spaces of interactions that the group envisions for our world, writ large. As stated above, engaging in praxis was most successful during my pre-dissertation research when I had relatively frequent dialogues with the group during performances and meetings about the research objectives, hashing out research goals and product ideas, and delineating topics or situations that would be off the table as research project data or themes.

During my data analysis, I approached these research questions using an action research “spiral” process, an iterative approach to data collection, analysis, action, and reanalysis (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007) and employing narrative and critical analysis methods in order to investigate: (a) thematics of TSC’s scripts and performances; (b) the individual personal narratives of transformation that

TSC members draw upon individually and collectively to enact through devised theater; and (c) the culture, community, and creative process of TSC and its impact on their roles in social justice, community, and professional activities in which they are involved.

Organization of Dissertation

This qualitative dissertation is organized into the following chapters: history and social context of the movement to end mass incarceration (Chapter II); conceptual framework (Chapter III); research design, methodology, and data analysis process (Chapter IV); TSC's history and its relationship to CCF (Chapter V); themes, thematics, and messaging of a TSC performance (Chapter VI); TSC's collective creation process (Chapter VII); thematics of TSC's talk-backs (Chapter VIII); and the elements of TSC's performance of a social movement and lessons learned from this study (Chapter IX).

Chapter II

SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR TSC'S SOCIAL CHANGE MISSION: THE FORMERLY INCARCERATED PEOPLE-LED MOVEMENT TO DISMANTLE MASS INCARCERATION

Since the commencement of this research study in 2015, representation of justice-involved women and of the context of mass incarceration has shifted considerably. Decades of research, advocacy, and activism focusing on the devastating impacts of mass incarceration on low-income communities of color created the momentum to change the mainstream social and political discourse. In 2010, Michelle Alexander published her highly influential book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. This work meticulously documented how the “war on drugs” created a legal system that disproportionately criminalized, incarcerated, and disenfranchised tens of millions of African Americans in the name of public safety. Per Alexander, this system erased the gains of the Civil Rights era for countless poor African Americans and their families.

In her preface, Alexander (2010) acknowledged that she had to make a shift in consciousness before she could see clearly that the war on drugs was systematically targeting African Americans. In 2010, it was far from the mainstream view that the criminal justice system was predicated on structural racism. In the introduction to *The*

New Jim Crow, Alexander recalled scoffing at this notion at the turn of the millennium when she was working as a civil rights attorney. Her book was framed deliberately as a call to action to unveil the hidden racism embedded in the criminal justice system and to acknowledge and support the efforts of those who had been working tirelessly to expose this injustice at a time when very few would listen. In the book's preface, Alexander explained the audiences to whom her book was aimed. First, she wanted to demonstrate to people engaged in racial justice work that mass incarceration must be seen as integral to this movement. She also had a second audience in mind:

I am also writing it for another audience—those who have been struggling to persuade their friends, neighbors, relatives, teachers, coworkers, or political representatives that something is eerily familiar about the way our criminal justice system operates, something that looks and feels a lot like an era we supposedly left behind, but have lacked the facts and data to back up their claims. It is my hope and prayer that this book empowers you and allows you to speak your truth with greater conviction, credibility, and courage. (p. xiii)

Today, it is not uncommon for think tanks and research publications, such as the Brennan Center for Justice (Chettiar & Raghavan, 2019; Roeder, Eisen, & Bowling, 2015), to introduce their criminal justice system reform work in this way:

The American public has decisively concluded that our approach to criminal justice isn't working. (para. 1)

Mass incarceration is the civil rights crisis of our time. The racial disparities pervasive in our justice system compound at every juncture: African Americans are more likely to be stopped by police, arrested, detained before trial, and given harsher sentences than whites. Worse, the disparities in our justice system perpetuate racial inequity in our society more broadly. (para. 2)

This couching of the criminal justice system as the “civil rights crisis of our time” is not relegated only to left-leaning scholars, politicians, and pundits. For example, in a March 2019 *Washington Examiner* opinion piece, Mooney and Rizer (2019) challenges

conservatives who feel they should rebuff focusing on the racial injustice of the criminal justice system because it is considered the purview of the left. The authors argued:

The uncomfortable truth is that research does provide evidence of racial inequality within multiple facets of our justice system. For example, studies have found that black individuals were assessed higher bail amounts for similar crimes and that black men were given longer sentences than white men even when controlling for other influencing factors. The list of studies suggesting differential treatment goes on and on. (para. 5)

Towards the end of their piece, they concluded:

Instead of dismissing racial justice as a “far-left issue,” conservatives should be leading the charge to reform our federal, state and local criminal justice systems. (para. 7)

Alexander (2010), as well as death penalty attorney Bryan Stevenson (known for his best-selling book *Just Mercy*, his TED Talk that has been viewed over five million times, and his launch of a groundbreaking lynching museum and memorial in Alabama (Bogert, 2018) and other researchers and policymakers, have made tremendous inroads into making criminal justice system reform a bipartisan issue (Tanner, 2019). There is now consensus that the familial and community effects of mass incarceration and the criminalization of low-income communities of color are urgent social justice issues that must be addressed by policymakers and government leaders.

Alexander (2010) ended her preface by honoring another segment of her intended audience:

Last, but definitely not least, I am writing this book for all those trapped within America’s latest caste system. You may be locked up or locked out of mainstream society, but you are not forgotten. (p. xiii)

Alexander positioned incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people as disenfranchised victims of a broken system. Yet, even within systems that have marginalized and curtailed the freedoms of millions of people through confinement, surveillance, and

differential treatment upon coming home from prison, those impacted by the criminal legal system have fought for their dignity and fair treatment. They have played a central role in bringing to light the injustices they faced personally, and how this has extended to the suffering of their families and communities. They created a strong foundation for the social movement to end mass incarceration, although their work and leadership are less visible. Theater for Social Change (TSC) is part of this formerly incarcerated people-led social movement.

In this chapter, I provide the historical, political, and social contexts for this action research project focusing on TSC. This starts with and is rooted in TSC's name, Theater for *Social Change*. TSC's mission is to touch audiences through personal storytelling in order "to change hearts and minds when it comes to stereotypes and misconceptions about what it means to have been to prison, and about mass incarceration" (College and Community Fellowship, "Theater for Social Change Ensemble" section). During her interview, one ensemble member reflected on TSC's social change mission:

People may look at us and deem us as successfully reintegrated [but] there are still barriers that we face due to having a felony conviction. And we want people to know that. And we will also want people to act on it. We [want to drive] agendas...and so we do that through our writing and through our performing.

For TSC, theater in service of social change means theater advocating for an end to the policies and practices that continue to punish people after they have finished their sentences. Social change also means creating affirmative policies and practices, such as widening access to education for people who have been impacted by the justice system.

In this chapter, I also present two areas to provide a broader context for TSC's social change mission. First, I present the racial, economic, and gender dimensions of the rise of mass incarceration and the historical context of the criminalization of low-income

communities of color. Second, I present the work of several 20th and 21st century social movement leaders and the strategies and values they developed as part of their movements to challenge these injustices. These are the precursors of and intersect with the contemporary movement to end mass incarceration and to transform the punitive and racist criminal legal system.

Part 1: The Racial, Economic, and Gender Dimensions of Mass Incarceration

The correctional system's explosive growth starting in the 1970s and spanning the next four decades became known as the era of mass incarceration. Although there was an overall drop in crime rates over this period, the massive rise in incarceration rates was not, for the most part, responsible for this drop. The Brennan Center for Justice (Roeder et al., 2015) found that expanded incarceration rates were responsible for increasing an individual's likelihood to recidivate. Moreover, the high incarceration rates disproportionately impacted people of color; for example, at the current rate, a third of Black men can expect to be incarcerated at some point in his lifetime. As economist Joseph Stiglitz wrote in the report's foreword: "One of the great problems we face today is mass incarceration, a tragedy which has been powerfully documented" (Roeder et al., 2015, p. 1). This tragedy is most pronounced in African American and Latino communities that are already living in poverty and often segregated in neighborhoods with high unemployment and levels of violence as well as failing schools with low graduation rates.

How did this "strange new experiment in public policy" (p. 1), per criminologist Bruce Western (2018), gain political ground? A number of toxic master narratives about

crime, race, and the “inner city” began to dominate the American media, justice system, and policy landscape in the 1970s. Attention-grabbing headlines and news stories about the violent and crime- and drug-infested inner-city ghettos became the impetus for criminalizing poor African American and Latino communities. Researchers, theorists, and advocates would collectively call attention to these racist and degrading master narratives, in which the escalation of mass imprisonment was fueled by “tough-on-crime” rhetoric and policies and the launching of the “war on drugs” that targeted low-income Black communities through intensive policing, racial profiling, and stop-and-frisk practices (Hinton, 2016; Mauer, 2006).

African American and Latino communities were already suffering from the impacts of neoliberal policies that resulted in the gutting of the economic and social infrastructure and the supports that served urban, working-class neighborhoods (Sudbury, 2005). By the 1980s, unionized blue-collar jobs had all but disappeared from the United States, as corporations moved their factories offshore to take advantage of low-wage, non-union labor and tax breaks designed to coax foreign investors and industries to set up shop in developing countries. As a result, the evaporation of well-paid industrial and manufacturing jobs that had propelled communities of color into the lower-middle- and middle classes created high unemployment rates and pushed people into lower-wage and unstable job sectors, or into the illicit street economy (Davis, 1997; Sudbury, 2005). Simultaneously, government aid and supports to families were cut by the Reagan and subsequent administrations, culminating with the most draconian measures, put in place under Bill Clinton, via the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. This legislation that was classes as “welfare reform” put

capped families' receipt of welfare benefits at 5 years, and, most detrimentally to individuals (and their families) whose incarceration was due to drug-related offenses, instituted a lifetime disqualification from receiving benefits for anyone with a felony drug conviction (Alexander, 2010; Sudbury, 2005, 2010; Wacquant, 2009). Low-income individuals, African Americans, and Latinos suffered the most acutely from this layering of policies that destroyed livelihoods and marriages, broke apart families, escalated street crime, and made policing and state control through incarceration a constant presence in their lives (Travis, 2002).

Media representations and politicians' stereotypes, combined with a misrepresentation of crime statistics, inflamed White, middle-class fears of urban violence, rampant drug use, and crime, enabling these detrimental policies to be implemented with wide public support (Davis, 1997; Wacquant, 2009). According to Mauer (2006), "Most images of the crime problem communicate fear, anxiety, and a distorted sense of actual extent of the problem" (p. 188). Over the past few decades since the advent of the tough-on-crime stance and the war on drugs, Black men have been portrayed by politicians and the media as violent criminals and drug abusers (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002), while Black women have been depicted as lazy, chronic welfare recipients, and, often, promiscuous (e.g., as prostitutes or teenage/single mothers) (Richie, 2012). Other groups have likewise been targeted because of fears stoked by the media and politicians and identified as "enemies": immigrants are blamed for taking away jobs from Americans; Muslims (or anyone who "looks Muslim") are feared as potential terrorists; and LGBTQ people, especially transgendered individuals, are threats to heteronormativity (Richie, 2012; Sudbury, 2005). These marginalized populations thus

become incriminated as “enemies of a stable society” (Richie, 2012, p. 3) and consequently targeted for arrest, deportation, or disinvestment—in essence, “systematically [eroding] the rights, privileges, and opportunities afforded disadvantaged groups” (p. 7).

This dehumanizing imagery and hateful representation stem from and confirm the deep-seated intersection of racism and classism throughout U.S. history. Despite the modest gains of the Civil Rights Movement that sought to redress the injustices that started during slavery and persisted through Jim Crow-era segregation and beyond, systemic racism drove the escalation of the criminalization of black and brown communities, mass incarceration, and the disinvestment of low-income communities of color. Loïc Wacquant’s (2002) analysis integrated the spatial with racial and class divisions that gave rise to the stripping of educational and social services from urban neighborhoods, to be replaced by more costly hyper-policing and criminal justice system enmeshment:

The prison and the criminal justice system more broadly contribute to the ongoing reconstruction of the ‘imagined community’ of Americans around the polar opposition between praiseworthy ‘working families’—implicitly white, suburban, and deserving—and the despicable ‘underclass’ of criminals, loafers, and leeches, a two-headed antisocial hydra personified by the dissolute teenage ‘welfare mother’ on the female side and the dangerous street ‘gang banger’ on the male side—by definition dark-skinned, urban and undeserving.... And the line that divides them is increasingly being drawn, materially and symbolically, by the prison. (pp. 58-59)

The material and spatial realities that plague African American and Latino communities (e.g., high unemployment; under-resourced and failing schools; lack of safe and affordable housing/homelessness; and concentration in low-income, urban neighborhoods) are a result of the history of *de facto* and *de jure* policies and practices

that produced segregated schools and neighborhoods (Hannah-Jones, 2014; Kozol, 2005; Massey & Denton, 1993). The racist underpinnings that gave rise to these conditions also fueled the rise of mass incarceration and neighborhood disinvestment. Hinton (2016) argued that these punitive policies commenced in the early 1960s in response to demographic shifts from the “Great Migration” of African Americans from the South to cities in the North and West, as well as to African Americans’ organizing and advancing the Civil Rights Movement. The federal government targeted its domestic interventions to urban centers with large African American communities, under the guise of “remedying racial discrimination, ending poverty, and fighting crime in American cities...” (p. 12). Kennedy launched a President’s Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime in 1961, and Johnson took this platform as a jumping-off point to create his War on Poverty, which evolved into “a means to suppress future rioting and crime” (pp. 12-13), in response to growing urban unrest. Hinton noted that “the Johnson administration quickly combined the existing education, health, housing and welfare programs aimed at eliminating crime’s root causes with the police training, research programs, and criminal justice and penal reforms intended to suppress criminal activity” (p. 13).

The militarization of the police was also a feature of Johnson’s War on Crime, with urban police forces receiving military-grade equipment and technological capabilities as well as increased authority. Even as welfare, housing, and education programs expanded, they were mandated by federal funding oversight to partner with police and surveillance agencies. In effect, 1960s liberal social welfare and civil rights policy and programs were the starting point for creating and funding elaborate systems of

policing, surveillance, and punishment. Johnson's dual strategy paved the way for Nixon and Ford to erode social programs and, eventually, community and social services funding diminished while policing, surveillance, and punishment institutional funding expanded (Hinton, 2016).

Taking an even longer historical view, Wacquant (2002, 2009), Alexander (2010), and Hinton (2016) argued that the United States' "racial caste" system took different forms over time, starting with slavery, then Jim Crow laws, and, ultimately, resulting in today's contemporary racialization of poverty and crime concentrated in areas where people of color reside or to where they have been displaced. Punitive policies were effectively backlashes against the modest gains that African Americans made during the Civil Rights Movement, just as Jim Crow laws were against the end of slavery (Alexander, 2010; Hinton, 2016).

Justice-Involvement Narratives, Through a Gender Lens

Low-income, justice-involved women of color navigate their lives and raise their families within this landscape of criminalization and poverty. However, their experiences and their needs are subordinate in the media in favor of the stereotypical image of the Black male criminal and, consequently, regarding all justice-involved people of color as conforming to this single stereotype. This has been one of the critical factors in rendering incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women's lives as invisible during and after being in custody (Richie, 2002). When women's incarceration rates increased dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s, the criminal justice system did not adapt to serve the needs of these women (Chesney-Lind, 2002).

When considering these increases, the statistics paint a more nuanced picture. From 1986 to 2004, the overall number of incarcerated women in the United States rose 400%, while African American women's incarceration rates increased 800% (Buchanan, 2007)—a faster rate of increase than that among men (Sudbury, 2005). In the 1990s, the rates of incarceration for African American women continued to escalate, despite overall crime rates declining (Sudbury, 2005). This reflected a gender-specific dynamic within the larger patterns of mass incarceration. For instance, as Kim Shayo Buchanan (2007) explained, “the war on drugs has racially targeted African American women and Latinas....” For example, “in New York State, 82% of Latinas and 65% of black women sentenced to prison were convicted of drug crimes, compared to only 40% of white women” (pp. 52-53).

With the punitive shift in sentencing policies from misdemeanors to felony convictions for drug abuse crimes, these women faced longer sentences (Alfred & Chlup, 2009) and, subsequently, greater difficulty in trying to reintegrate into a society that bars people with felonies from accessing basic needs such as housing and social services. Women are often implicated in the drug crimes of their boyfriends or partners, even when the women play minor roles in these crimes. They can also end up serving much harsher sentences because they may refuse to testify against their husbands, boyfriends, or lovers, or because they do not have enough information (or, in fact, any information) on the crime to enable them to enter into a plea bargain. The principal (male) perpetrators of the crime are able to cut their sentences significantly because they can take advantage of plea bargaining, which means that their sentence lengths are a fraction of the lengths that the women with whom they are involved must serve (Richie, 2012). Although the rate of

incarceration of African American women has been dropping since 2000 and is now closer to (but still higher than) the rates of Latinas and White women, the female prison population today is nearly eight times higher than it was in 2000 (Sentencing Project, 2019, pp. 1-2).

The policing, corrections, and post-incarceration surveillance system that gave rise to this unprecedented increase in women's, as well as men's, incarceration remains largely intact. As The Sentencing Project (2019) put it, "Our criminal justice system today is like a bicycle stuck in one gear: the prison gear" ("Criminal Justice Facts" section). The Prison Policy Initiative (Jones, 2018) reported that around 4.5 million people, nearly twice the prison population, are under community supervision in the form of probation or parole. The Initiative is seeking to widen the lens of "understanding correctional control beyond incarceration [to] give us a more accurate and complete picture of punishment in the United States, showing the expansive reach of our criminal justice system" (para. 3). Women now account for close to a quarter of the total population under probation and parole, at over one million (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2018, p. 1). The mass punishment of women persists.

Reentry and the Collateral Consequences of Mass Incarceration

The phase of one's punishment when a prisoner is released from incarceration and comes home is known as *reentry*. Jeremy Travis (2005) defined reentry as a process, rather than a one-time situation of being released from prison:

Reentry is the process of leaving prison and returning to society. Reentry is not a form of supervision, like parole. Reentry is not a goal, like rehabilitation or reintegration. Reentry is not an option. Reentry reflects the iron law of imprisonment: they all come back. (p. xxi)

This distinction is important because it means that the process of reentry is not controlled by the individual coming home. One's reentry is deeply impacted by the additional criminal justice system policies and practices with which one must comply as soon as he or she returns to the community. Advocates, researchers, and activists working on the issue of mass incarceration over the years have called attention to additional injustices to the system that continue to punish people who return home after they have completed their prison sentence. These continuing punishments are *the collateral consequences of mass incarceration*. Sheely and Kneipp (2015) defined collateral consequences, per the American Bar Association, as "legally- and socially-imposed penalties or disadvantages that automatically occur upon a person's conviction for a felony, misdemeanor, or other offense, and are imposed in addition to the sentence enacted by the court" (p. 2).

Mauer and Chesney-Lind (2002) termed collateral consequences "invisible punishment" because the familiar image of criminal-justice punishment that many people convicted of a crime experience continues after they come home. Many are under community supervision, probation, or parole, for example—surveillance systems that restrict movement, association, and impose mandates for behavior—that are virtually invisible to those who do not experience it firsthand, or have family or community members who are subject to this type of surveillance. Additionally, after release from prison, many formerly incarcerated people experience a constellation of policies, structures, and practices that prevent them from living a decent quality of life, creating "social exclusion," a term Travis (2002) borrowed from the United Kingdom's Labor government discourse (p. 19). These included policies that prevent people with records from accessing public benefits, being able to vote, and maintaining parental rights; and

systematically discriminate against people with criminal records in employment-hiring practices (Chin, 2017; Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019).

Part 2: The Movement to End Mass Incarceration

The Vera Institute of Justice, a non-partisan nonprofit organization that works in partnership with the government on criminal justice system research and piloting evidence-based alternatives to the current policies and programs, has made dismantling mass incarceration one of its three central issues. It explained that:

A movement has blossomed in which formerly incarcerated people lead alongside diverse and influential allies, powerfully capturing what's at stake: that runaway use of incarceration dehumanizes poor people and people of color, damages already marginalized communities, does not advance public safety, and siphons public resources with no social benefit. ("Ending Mass Incarceration" section)

Organizations and grassroots campaigns started and/or run by formerly incarcerated people are becoming increasingly prominent. College and Community Fellowship (CCF) is one example of an organization that is led by a formerly incarcerated leader and writer, who is also a member of TSC.

Many TSC ensemble members define themselves and their theater and other work as advocacy in service of a social movement that aims to end mass incarceration. I talk about social movements in the plural, because the movement to end mass incarceration and the over-policing, criminalization, disenfranchisement, and dehumanization of black and brown communities is really part of a number of intersecting or overlapping movements that inform TSC's process, goals, and strategies. TSC must also be understood to be part of these social movements.

I want to take the opportunity to define the term *social movement*. While social movement theory is too vast to present here, I pull from definitions that are helpful for the purpose of providing a frame for the social movements to end mass incarceration and the criminalization of low-income people of color. I found legal scholar Andrea L. Dennis' (2016) integration of different scholarly definitions of social movements to be well-suited for understanding these movements. She defined social movements as "marginalized groups [employing] continuous, collective action to publicly challenge the existing social structure and demand power holders and government authorities make changes" (p. 31). This definition therefore includes the **agents** of the social movement—*people who are oppressed or marginalized*, with some theorists pointing specifically to the shared identity of that marginalized group as providing a critical cohesiveness and solidarity. It also includes the **mechanisms**—*continual, collective action*. The **site of the action** is the *public sphere*. The **targets of their social change vision** are the *unjust social systems, institutions, and structures and those in power who perpetuate them* and who often benefit from the systems being maintained. This model works most appropriately for social movements of the 20th and 21st centuries.

I have widened this model of social movements to include **ethos**—*the principles and values that undergird the movement*. As I show below, the movements to end mass incarceration or dismantle the punishment system have developed a set of guiding principles that are predicated on building a new set of social, political, and economic relations. Prisons are situated within a world that exacts punishment on communities that have already been marginalized and disenfranchised throughout history. The contemporary anti-prison and anti-punishment movements envision a world where

communities of color are healthy and safe, and where they have access to the resources and opportunities to live out their full potential. These movements organize their social relations accordingly.

To illustrate, Orisanmi Burton in his 2016 dissertation focused on the revolutionary consciousness that developed from the prison organizing that spurred the Attica prison insurgency and the subsequent unsuccessful attempts of the carceral state to quell incarcerated intellectuals' and activists' quest for justice, leading to a robust anti-prison movement. Based on Eyerman and Jamison's (1991) conceptualization of social movements as "a cognitive territory, a new conceptual space that is filled by a dynamic interaction between different groups and organizations" (p. 55), Burton adopted this social movement framework for his own study of Attica and the "Think Tank" at Green Haven Prison that Eddie Ellis, who was transferred from Attica following the rebellion, organized to continue the consciousness-raising groups that formed at Attica (p. 6), which is discussed in the below section.

Likewise, I identified TSC as being a part of social movements that are creating new conceptual spaces and, additionally, as a part of the dynamic interplay of the individuals, organizations, and institutions with which they work and for whom they perform. Throughout this dissertation, I show how TSC creates new conceptual spaces, how they are involved in advocacy and with professional organizations with the mission of transforming the criminal justice system, and how they employ theater as a call to action for individuals and groups to join the movement to dismantle mass incarceration. The values and commitments that undergird TSC are part of a lineage of activism that has roots in prison reform.

Eddie Ellis Helps Create a Movement

Harlem-born Eddie Ellis is a defining figure in the history of anti-prison activism, orienting the movement's values, strategies, and direction. An article in the *New York Amsterdam News*, one of the oldest and most prestigious African American-run news publications in the United States, referred to Ellis as "a man who is practically synonymous with prison reform" (Kene, 2011).

Ellis was part of a group of incarcerated activists interested in education and consciousness development, which led them to form study groups and a "Think Tank" to tackle oppressive forces inside and outside of prison. This group of prison activists witnessed the shifting demographics of prisons from majority White to majority Black and Latino, also noticing that a significant portion of the incarcerated population came from many of the same poverty-stricken and segregated neighborhoods in New York City (Clines, 1992). With research design assistance from psychologist Kenneth Clark, Ellis and his colleagues designed a New York State-wide survey to study the neighborhood conditions of people in prison (Fine, 2013, pp. 688-689). This research team found that high rates of crime were being committed by people from and in the same few neighborhoods, which was leading to high rates of recidivism, with a large proportion of people cycling in and out of prison from seven low-income, segregated neighborhoods in New York City (Clines, 1992).

In a *New York Times* article about Ellis's community work shortly after his release from prison in 1992, Clines wrote:

Mr. Ellis is one of a handful of gray-bearded model prisoners lately filtering back into freedom bearing the hopes of prisoner study groups they left behind, groups like the blacks' Resurrection Study Group and the Hispanic inmates' Conciencia. (para. 6)

These once-captive penologists are intent on urging a new nontraditional outlook and new social, economic and educational programs to tightly relate the 62 state prisons with the seven “sympiotic neighborhoods,” as Mr. Ellis calls them—the Lower East Side, the South Bronx, Harlem, Brownsville, Bedford-Stuyvesant, East New York and South Jamaica. (para. 7)

This article emphasized Ellis and his colleagues’ “new nontraditional outlook and new social, economic and educational programs” (para. 7) developed during and after prison: programming and solutions developed by and for people whose knowledge and experience are rooted in their communities and neighborhoods, “[getting] involved creatively in their community problems” (para. 8), and approaching solutions derived from their firsthand expertise. Ellis went on to found the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions (CNUS) at Medgar Evers College, City University of New York, and to become an executive producer of listener-supported radio WBAI’s weekly radio program *On the Count* (Burton, 2016, p. 34). *On the Count*’s mission is “to identify and examine local, state, national and international criminal and social justice issues directed towards reducing the inappropriate reliance on punishment and incarceration as the primary response to social and economic inequality” (WBAI, 2012-15). The *On the Count* website proudly proclaims that it is the only radio program produced and hosted exclusively by people who are formerly incarcerated. The program has presented episodes focusing on TSC that show how they connect their work to their advocacy goals; I detail one of these later in this dissertation.

Two examples of Ellis’s work are particularly illustrative of his approach and values that have become part of the movement to dismantle mass incarceration. The Seven Neighborhood Study and accompanying strategies for transforming these neighborhoods were pioneering. What made this work innovative was that Ellis and his

colleagues were part of the prison community that they were studying and for which they were developing interventions, developing their inquiry from a vantage point to which few researchers and policymakers had access. Ellis would take the spirit of this work and approach with him when he came home from prison with the founding of CNUS, a center that focused on research, policy, and advocacy to transform the punishment system. CNUS was “the only think tank of its kind” (Gray, 2010, p. 8), both in its focusing on criminal justice system transformation and its staffing almost exclusively by formerly incarcerated people. CNUS included the NuLeadership Policy Group, a national group of formerly incarcerated leaders focused on contributing to the shaping of reentry and justice system policies. The group has been involved in policy dialogue and advocacy on issues such as ending the draconian Rockefeller drug laws, increasing access to holistic reentry services for people coming home from prison, documenting the economic and psychosocial impact of prison sentences on family members of people doing time, and revamping parole policies (Gray, 2010, p. 9).

One member of the NuLeadership Policy Group, Glenn Martin, developed the view of the value of formerly incarcerated persons shaping justice system policies as “cultural competency,” able to bring a perspective to justice system reform that had previously not included people who had been through the system (Gray, 2010, p. 8). In 2013, Martin founded JustLeadershipUSA (JLUSA), an organization with the mission to reduce the correctional population by half by 2030 (JustLeadershipUSA, “#halfby2020” section). Martin’s theory of change is that “those closest to the problem are closest to the solution” (Sturm & Tae, 2017, p. 8). He operationalized this core principle by focusing a large part of JLUSA’s work on identifying and cultivating the leadership skills of

formerly incarcerated people through a cohort-based mid-level professional yearlong training program and an emerging leaders workshop series for directly impacted advocates working in different regions in the United States (JustLeadershipUSA, “Leadership” section). Martin’s early leadership development and penchant for justice system reform advocacy were ignited when he served on the Inmate Liaison Committee while in prison (Sturm & Tae, 2017, p. 9). Like Ellis and Martin, many other formerly incarcerated leaders would emerge to become decarceration and justice system reform advocacy leaders, with some starting their advocacy journey while incarcerated and others after they came home.

Returning to Eddie Ellis, Ellis employed the NuLeadership Policy Group platform to launch a campaign to put an end to the use of dehumanizing language while speaking about and to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. Ellis wrote “An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language,” which was posted on the CNUS site and distributed as a press release (Ellis, 2003):

One of [the NuLeadership Policy Group’s] first initiatives is to respond to the negative public perception about our population as expressed in the language and concepts used to describe us. When we are not called mad dogs, animals, predators, offenders and other derogatory terms, we are referred to as inmates, convicts, prisoners and felons—all terms devoid of humanness which identify us as “things” rather than as people. These terms are accepted as the “official” language of the media, law enforcement, prison industrial complex and public policy agencies. However, they are no longer acceptable for us and we are asking people to stop using them. (p. 3)

Calling me inmate, convict, prisoner, felon, or offender indicates a lack of understanding of who I am, but more importantly what I can be. I can be and am much more than an “ex-con,” or an “ex-offender,” or an “ex-felon.” (p. 4)

Ellis’s letter highlights the power and consequences of language. First, the subject of the letter shows how language belittles people who have been to prison. Their identity

becomes forever branded as someone who has served time. This constrains the ability of people labeled as ex-offenders or ex-cons to aspire to become people who are not defined by their mistakes. Because the labels are imposed from the outside by institutions that make up society—e.g., the media, education, the government—this imposed societal label becomes a social impediment for people who are being defined by having been incarcerated (Boudin, 2014). Second, Ellis uses language that demonstrates his and other formerly incarcerated people’s agency and empowerment. He wrote that dehumanizing language is “no longer acceptable *for us* and *we are asking* people to stop using them” and “I can be and am much more than an ‘ex-con,’ or an ‘ex-offender,’ or an ‘ex-felon.’” Speaking confidently, in the first person, and clearly stating the changes that formerly incarcerated people need society to make to restore their humanity, and declaring his worth, Ellis uses the language of strength and empowerment to deliver his message.

To this day, the movement’s focus on the issue of language in the public, social services, educational, and correctional spheres has resonance and power. Formerly incarcerated leader DeAnna Hoskins (2019), who succeeded Glenn Martin as President and CEO of JLUSA, wrote an opinion piece in *The Hill* entitled “Language Matters for Justice Reform.” Her article called attention to the language used during the public launch of the Trump administration’s federal access-to-jobs initiative called “Ready to Work,” whose stated intent was to help people in prison connect to employment for better economic outcomes after their release. Hoskins critiqued the administration’s use of the same language that Ellis in his “Open Letter” called on media and government to stop using. She wrote:

Throughout the press conference speakers, including the president, used the word “inmate” and the Department of Justice press statement used the terms “inmate” and “offender” multiple times. These terms are offensive and dehumanizing. By using labeling language such as “inmate” we immediately ascribe the worst of society’s stigmas to a person based on having been incarcerated—instantly erasing their humanity—and therefore erasing inherent human dignity and rights. (para. 1)

Later in the article, Hoskins (2019) referred to Ellis’s Open Letter:

Eddy [*sic*] Ellis, the late justice reform leader, penned a letter more than 15 years ago that ignited a movement demanding an end to dehumanizing language. He wrote, “the worst part of repeatedly hearing your negative definition of me is that I begin to believe it myself....” Movement leaders have long-recognized Mr. Ellis’ call to use humanizing language—but journalists, elected officials, and people new to the field must recognize this and make the shift as well. (para. 4)

As I show later in this dissertation, the impact of dehumanizing language is the focus of several TSC scenes. TSC’s call for the humanization of formerly incarcerated people developed alongside Ellis and the NuLeadership Policy Group’s work. There was much cross-fertilization between the formerly incarcerated social justice communities, with CCF and TSC developing in tandem with Ellis’s social movement building.

Leading with Conviction, a 2017 report that came out of a research collaboration between JLUSA and the Center for Institutional and Social Change at Columbia Law School, identified the characteristics and capacities that enable formerly incarcerated leaders to play a significant and meaningful role in the creation of humane justice system policy. Researchers Sturm and Tae (2017) found that the perspectives of formerly incarcerated people had incredible value in a number of arenas. They termed these leaders’ perspectives *ground truth*. The ground truths of the prison and reentry systems can be understood as firsthand experiences with surviving community and institutional conditions and the challenges that lead many people to become enmeshed in the justice

system, move through the justice system, and then prevail in rebuilding their lives after incarceration. Sturm and Tae noted:

These experiences provide these leaders with direct knowledge about the operation of the criminal legal system, how people move into and through that system, and the cumulative impact of their interactions with many other systems such as education, social welfare, public housing, and health care. For the leaders individually and collectively, this experience builds a reservoir of ground truth—personal knowledge of how these systems actually function, interact, fail, and change. (p. 16)

This ground truth is what provides formerly incarcerated leaders with knowledge of the ways in which social and public systems and policies fail low-income people of color, as well as how they intersect and layer to create trauma and leave people without access to the valuable resources afforded to middle-class communities. This ground truth also endows formerly incarcerated people with the wisdom to imagine and create alternative systems that nurture community self-sufficiency and well-being.

In sum, a vibrant self-directed movement to transform the justice system led by and for formerly incarcerated people and their families and communities has developed over the past several decades. This movement has roots in the radical political activism that emerged during the latter stage of the Civil Rights Movement, with community self-determination and agency at its core. This is the social justice movement ethos that guides and motivates CCF and TSC, a social movement that they see themselves in the service of and in which they are deeply rooted.

Angela Davis and a World Without Prisons

Angela Davis is a well-known anti-prison activist who was inspired and motivated by the prison conditions she witnessed while incarcerated, as well as by the stories of the women she met while in prison. Davis was charged with involvement in a violent

incident whereby several prisoners armed themselves and took over a courtroom, leading to the deaths of several people. She spent more than a year in prison, but was eventually acquitted and released (Barnett, 2003). She launched a larger prison movement to free political prisoners, founding the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression. The Alliance defended well-known political prisoners such as the organizers of the Attica prison rebellion, Puerto Rican nationalist Lolita Lebron, and the Wilmington 10—civil rights activists who were wrongfully convicted of and incarcerated for arson (Goodman, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). During an interview with the public radio program, *Democracy Now!*, Davis told the show’s host and executive producer, Amy Goodman, “I think that we were helping to lay the foundation for movements against racist police violence today” (47:57) and was asked to connect her experiences then to today’s youth organizing:

We had no idea how complicated these issues really are. I often point out the fact that when we began—when we were calling for black freedom, that was always freedom for the black man, you know? And women were doing most of the organizing, and the women who were doing the organizing didn’t even realize that we were excluding ourselves, through our very vocabulary, from the terrain of freedom. And that’s no longer the case. (51:10)

Davis was alluding to the work of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement co-founders, women who were organizing from the lens of intersectional identities. The Black Lives Matter website describes as its mission “to build local power and to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (Black Lives Matter, para. 1). The agents and objective of this movement are not just Black men and their freedom, as Davis felt was the case in the Black Panther Party work in which she was participating, which ultimately caused her to leave the Party. The agents of change and the beneficiaries of freedom in the BLM movement are inclusive:

We are expansive. We are a collective of liberators who believe in an inclusive and spacious movement. We also believe that in order to win and bring as many people with us along the way, we must move beyond the narrow nationalism that is all too prevalent in Black communities. We must ensure we are building a movement that brings all of us to the front. (para. 2)

We affirm the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. Our network centers those who have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. (para. 3)

Davis pointed to the vocabulary of the early movement as exclusionary of women and others who did not fit the identity of Black men. In contrast, BLM actively embraces the language of inclusion and diversity.

Since the founding of the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, Davis has been a prolific writer, focusing on the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class, in effect laying the ethical groundwork for inclusive movements such as BLM. She also wrote several articles and books on prison abolition, in which she addressed racialization of the criminal justice system. Davis (1997) wrote about the Clinton-era political landscape that has made it “increasingly difficult to identify the deep structural entrenchment of contemporary racism” (p. 265). First, she described the political rhetoric of the era that claimed the United States had entered a post-racial era, resulting in a color-blind society. Under this rhetoric, addressing the realities of racism became politically untenable, and leaders or advocates who focused on racism and inequality were therefore marginalized or silenced. Moreover, this myth of color-blindness resulted in more deeply embedded structural racism because criminal justice system policies were discussed in race-neutral terms, rendering a discussion of the policies’ material consequences taboo. Davis explained the resultant devastating consequences on the Black community:

When the structural character of racism is ignored in discussions about crime, and the rising population of incarcerated people, the racial imbalance in jails and prisons is treated as a contingency, at best as a product of the ‘culture of poverty,’ and at worst as proof of an assumed black monopoly on criminality. The high proportion of Black people in the criminal justice system is thus normalized and neither the state nor the general public is required to talk about and act on the meaning of that racial imbalance.... By relying on the alleged “race-blindness” of such laws, black people are surreptitiously constructed as racial subjects, thus manipulated, exploited, and abused, while the structural persistence of racism—albeit in changed forms—in social and economic institutions, and in the national cultural as a whole, is adamantly denied. (p. 65)

Davis theorized that the fear of communism in the mid-20th century has been replaced by the fear of crime. The same level of fanaticism against communism that led to the buildup of the military industrialized complex has infected anti-crime hysteria, enabling unprecedented levels of prison and jail construction and neighborhood surveillance, and a bloated correctional system filled by people of color.

Davis also called attention to the growing numbers of Black women who were victims of this anti-crime zeal. While women’s incarceration rates were much smaller than male rates, women’s incarceration rates were skyrocketing, and Black women’s share of this burden were outpacing White women’s rates. Davis wrote that the criminalization of women and its impacts on their lives and families are more complicated than what incarcerated men face. Women who do not fit the definition of acceptable womanhood, such as sex workers, drug users, or single mothers, have been punished for their lifestyles or difficult economic situations. Women who receive a drug conviction are incarcerated at higher rates than men who get drug convictions. They are often labeled as unfit to be good mothers. Davis concluded that one must look through the lens of race, class, and gender to understand low-income Black women’s experiences.

Davis wrapped up her article with a discussion of research she has undertaken with sociologist Kum-Kum Bhavnani, interviewing 35 women in San Francisco County Jail about how race and gender created the conditions that led to their incarceration, as well as their ideas for alternatives to the punishment system to which they were remanded. Importantly, Davis announced that this research was helping her and Bhavnani theorize a new paradigm drawing upon “the radical abolitionist strategy” (p. 277) that grew out of the prison organizing of the 1960s and 1970s. She declared that she and Bhavnani aimed to develop alternatives to the prison system based on the “voices and agency of a variety of imprisoned women” (p. 277). She proposed that abolition would be made possible through a collaboration between three sectors: research, public policy, and grassroots organizing.

In her 2003 book *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Davis continued to develop her theories on prison abolition, gravitating towards the approach of working outside current structures and institutions in order to “create an entirely different—and perhaps more egalitarian—system of justice” (p. 105). She believed that we cannot imagine such alternatives because the criminal justice system is not a single system; rather, it represents many intersecting institutions, practices, and relationships based on entrenched power and hierarchies and economic, social, and political arrangements that must be deconstructed. It is seemingly impossible to dismantle these without a clear idea of what we desire to build in its place. She argued that we must

envision a continuum of alternatives to imprisonment—demilitarization of schools, revitalization of education at all levels, a health system that provides free physical and mental care to all, and a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance. (p. 107)

Schools can therefore be seen as the most powerful alternative to jails and prisons. Unless the current structures of violence are eliminated from schools in impoverished communities of color—including the presence of armed security guards and police—and unless schools become places that encourage the joy of learning, these schools will remain the major conduits to prisons. (p. 108)

Davis viewed transforming the education system as a means of transforming our justice system, imagining schools as sites of caring, learning, and compassion. This re-imagining of healthy and safe communities—places where people thrive because their physical and mental health and educational needs are met, rather than characterized by militarization, impoverishment, and deprivation—is a vision predicated on restorative justice to redress historical injustices that underpin many aspects of today’s movement to end mass incarceration.

Reclaiming Hope Through Education

In addition to this focus on a restorative justice approach, the contemporary movement to end mass incarceration, importantly, recognizes the primacy of the ideas and leadership of formerly incarcerated activists, who provide critical knowledge and experience regarding the effects of public policies on the incarcerated population and, consequently, the most effective strategies for this population. The story of one federal policy, the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act that took federal funding away from college-in-prison programs (Fine et al., 2001), is a prime example of how punitive public policies are felt in the deepest recesses of institutions that are invisible to a large majority of the U.S. population, as well as the particularly broad disconnect between policymakers and the effects on the targeted population in the case of the incarcerated. TSC members remain critical of and engaged in advocacy to reverse the

1994 policy that took college out of prisons, regularly writing, speaking, and performing about the personal impacts of public policies.

In 1991, Senator Jesse Helms proposed putting an end to educational funding access for incarcerated people. He was quoted in a 1992 *Los Angeles Times* article as arguing, “You may teach inmates how to fix automobiles.... You may teach them how to write, certainly how to read. But a college education free of charge? Such a policy is an outrage” (Baldauf, 1992). In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed into law a more expansive punitive crime bill, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. Looking back, policy analysts and criminologists have criticized the bill for having exacted enormous costs in financial and human terms while making a negligible difference on crime rates. The 1994 crime bill incentivized states to toughen up their sentencing lengths, leading to further swelling of the U.S. incarcerated population that had ballooned since the 1970s (Alexander, 2010; Mauer, 2006; Parenti, 2008). The crime bill also contained sections that prescribed what amounted to further punishment for people already serving out their punishment in prison: taking publicly funded college out of the prison system, per Helms’ 1991 proposal (Mauer, 2006, p. 79).

Prior to the “tough on crime” era, the federal government had briefly helped nurture the expansion of college-in-prison programs before instituting the policies that would be responsible for their demise a little over two decades later. During the decade in which civil rights legislation and “the war on poverty” made gains, the 1965 Higher Education Act (HEA) expanded financial aid and other access programs to low-income people. Seven years later, the Pell Grant Program was created to provide funds for low-income college students, funds that were not required to be repaid (Cervantes et al.,

2005). Both the HEA provisions and Pell Grant programs extended to college students who were pursuing their degrees while incarcerated. By the time of the 1994 crime bill, there were 350 college programs in prison throughout the United States, made possible in large part by Pell Grants. However, the 1994 crime bill amended the HEA by blocking access to Pell and other government higher education funding for people in prison. Within a year of the bill's passage, the 350 higher education programs available nationwide in correctional facilities were reduced to eight (Fine, 2013). In TSC's home state of New York—where almost all of the theater ensemble members had served their sentences—66 of the 70 higher education programs in prisons closed in the span of 4 months (Karpowitz & Kenner, 1995).

At Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women, the end of the college prison program was devastating for the women who had benefitted greatly from the program, as students and volunteers. The report, *Changing Minds: The Impact of College in a Maximum-security Prison*, chronicled the response that a group of incarcerated women made after the college program ended. At first, many women in the prison felt hopeless:

In June of 1995, the last graduation took place. During the following weeks, the women who had staffed the Learning Center, who had received their bachelor's and master's degrees and who had acted as role models, packed books, put computers in boxes, took posters off walls and turned their learning center into an empty shell. A feeling of despair settled over the prison as women experienced a loss of hope about their own futures and the futures of younger women coming into the prison. (Fine et al., 2001, p. 6)

Rather than allow their hopes to evaporate permanently, in 1997, a self-organized and highly motivated group of women decided to create an Inmate Committee to investigate ways that college could continue at Bedford Hills. This committee worked closely with then-Superintendent of Bedford Hills Elaine Lord and other correctional administrators,

Westchester and NYC community and faith-based groups, and higher education leaders to create a new, privately funded program called College Bound that brought together a group of regional colleges to provide professors and courses, with Marymount Manhattan College being the institution conferring the degrees. The privately funded College Bound program was launched a mere 6 months after the public college program was closed (Fine, 2013, p. 690).

In response to politicians and policymakers' efforts to reduce the justice system solely to a mechanism to punish transgressors, the Inmate Committee was extolling the rehabilitative effect of higher education, framing the women's motivation to engage in higher education as a way to take personal responsibility and to better themselves during their sentence in order to become actively engaged in their own rehabilitation, with the aim of giving back to society in the long run. Becoming actively engaged in education became a form of self-improvement, bringing hope to women whose hopes and dreams had often been taken away well before their entering the prison system. Higher education also triggered an opportunity for the women to hone their critical thinking and analytical skills, which would fundamentally shift the way they viewed themselves and society.

The women who participated in bringing college back to prison recommended that a research project be launched to examine the impact of the college program. City University of New York Social Psychology Professor Michelle Fine was asked to direct the project. She agreed to lead the research if it were designed and carried out as a participatory project—an authentic and equal partnership between CUNY researchers and graduate students, incarcerated women trained in research methods, the Bedford Hills administration, and the New York State Department of Correctional Services (from

whom they requested data about recidivism rates on women who did and did not participate in college-in-prison programs) (Fine, 2013). The results of the research project were published in the *Changing Minds* report in 2001.

The main research findings of the report demonstrated, first, that college-in-prison programs reduce recidivism rates considerably, thereby saving taxpayers money. Second, the culture of the education program made a prison-wide impact, whereby the prison felt safer for officers and incarcerated women alike and reduced disciplinary incidents, an effect that was even more pronounced for women who participated in the College Bound program. Lastly, higher education transformed the lives of women and their children in the long term, lasting well after mothers came home from prison. College education helped the women to assume positive aspirations and identities, inspired them to commit to giving back to their families and communities, and led them to make choices that turned them away from crime involvement. All of these positive impacts led to healthier and stronger relationships with children and others.

The report narrative laid out the context of the lives of people incarcerated in New York State broadly, and the women at Bedford Hills specifically. The state prison population at that time was 84% Black and Latino. Sixty-five percent of the prison population came from New York City, almost all from low-income neighborhoods segregated by race. Around 66% of the New York State prison population were not high school or GED diploma holders, while 90% of the New York City jail population had no high school or GED diploma. The women of Bedford Hills were 80% Black and Latina and mostly from poor New York City neighborhoods. Only 49% held a GED or diploma,

which contrasted greatly with the 88% of the U.S. adult population ages 25-29 who hold a GED or HS diploma (Fine et al., 2001, p. 5).

The report pointed out that these statistics showed a link between educational failure and incarceration. For many years, education had been viewed as a means of prisoner rehabilitation; as early as 1870, the American Correctional Association called for educational access to people in prison, but it was not until 1970 that New York State law made it mandatory to provide educational programming because the state felt that education would support incarcerated people's rehabilitation, socialization, and engaged citizenship, and provide the skills for employment to provide for their families. Federal and state funding was allocated to pay for these programs, but the 1994 Clinton crime bill prohibited federal funding from being used for college-in-prison programs (p. 5). College was no longer viewed as an aspect of rehabilitation; instead, it was framed as a privilege that people in prison did not deserve because they were labeled as criminals. In the face of the evidence that college-in-prison programs lowered recidivism rates, the punitive turn in crime policy won out.

The report revealed how and why education had a transformative impact on incarcerated women, making a case for the reinstatement of federal funding and improved access to college for people who were incarcerated and formerly incarcerated. Bringing college back to prison at Bedford Hills helped to ignite a movement to advocate for the reinstatement of federal funding for college education in prison and the expansion of access for formerly incarcerated people. The movement builders understood higher education access in and after prison as a way of redressing historic educational inequities in low-income communities of color as well as enhancing long-term stability and thriving

for the people and communities impacted by mass incarceration, which was more effective than the reentry policies and practices of surveillance and management.

TSC is deeply committed to showing the transformative impact of education in the women's own lives in order to change hearts and minds on whether people who have been incarcerated are worthy of such intellectual and personal growth and development. As I show later, TSC's material resonates with many of the same themes, concepts, and approaches outlined in the *Changing Minds* report, so I believe that it is important to outline briefly the particularly salient ideas from this report.

The report detailed how higher education is transformative for women in prison:

The core elements of education, such as self-reflection, critique and inquiry, enable a transformed sense of self and, in turn, the women contribute to a rich college community.... Critical thinkers who actively participate in their lives and social surroundings take responsibility for past and future actions and view themselves as engaged in changing society and themselves. (p. 25)

This excerpt cited critical thinking skills development as a powerful tool for women in prison to nurture their sense of self, which then can lead them to take this newly developed self-awareness to become actively involved in taking control of their own lives and becoming involved in their communities, whether in their educational community or in society more broadly. This process of self-discovery also accompanies women taking responsibility for their past and future trajectories. According to Fine et al. (2001), through self-awareness, women develop a sense of agency, which in turn leads them to make positive choices and develop a sense of responsibility for their lives and for their communities.

It should be noted that a number of other prison programs supporting higher education were created to address the loss of correctional educational programs in the

wake of the 1994 crime bill. For example, Hudson Link for Higher Education, in Ossining, New York, was founded under similar circumstances as the Bedford Hills program (Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, “History of Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison” section). Bard College Prison Initiative was founded in 1999 by undergraduates at Bard College in response to the end of college in prison, and it is now a vibrant program serving eight prisons and held up as national model for prison programs throughout the nation (Bard Prison Initiative, “Who We Are—History” section).

Fine (2013) looked back on the *Changing Minds* research project 20 years after it was published. She noted that part of the success of the research project was that the teamwork and collaboration created a strong sense of community and developed the leadership, research, and advocacy skills of the incarcerated women who participated. The longer-term impact of the report included publishing the findings in multiple publications, producing advocacy literature, and sending the report to the governor of every state and all New York State legislators, and the team members have presented their findings nationwide (Fine, 2013).

A robust movement within the reentry community made up of advocacy organizations, reentry service providers, and higher education institutions has emerged, fueled by *Changing Minds* and subsequent research documenting the beneficial effects of prison and reentry education. Fine (2013) observed:

More significantly, the [College Bound] graduates themselves are walking, talking, lecturing, and civically engaged embodied evidence of the impact of college in prison.... Many continue to work on projects with the Public Science Project documenting the impact of prison and college in prison on prisoners and their families; chronicling the obstacles confronted by formerly incarcerated students applying to college and graduate schools; cataloguing the racial impact

of the “three strikes and you’re out” laws in California and the denial of parole to long-termers men and women accused of violent crimes in New York State; evaluating the impact of policing in schools and “stop and frisk” in communities on youth of color “growing up policed.” (p. 693)

The advocacy community has made progress in expanding educational access in prisons. Since Fine’s reflections were published in 2013, advocacy for the restoration of Pell Grants to college prison programs led to the creation of the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program in 2015 under the Obama administration, giving an initial 12,000 students access to federal funding to enroll in college in prison (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Other gains included removing the question from college applications for many public and private higher education systems around the country that asks applicants to disclose if they were ever convicted of a crime (Evans, 2016). These gains have involved formerly incarcerated people at the center of social movement organizing, and the momentum of their movements will no doubt continue.

Important to the TSC story, one of the co-authors of the *Changing Minds* report who was active in the Inmate Committee that organized to bring college back to Bedford Hills, subsequently helped to get the Bard Prison Initiative into Bayview Correctional Facility once she was transferred there from Bedford Hills to finish out her sentence. She joined CCF, earned her master’s degree, and is now a member of TSC. Her dedication to activism was born at Bedford Hills, and she brought this advocacy commitment with her to every institution in which she was involved. It is also noteworthy that a College Bound program professor named Barbara Martinsons founded College and Community Fellowship as a direct response to seeing women struggle to finish their degrees once they came home from prison. One of CCF’s earliest programs was TSC. CCF’s current Executive Director, Vivian Nixon, is a national movement leader and also a member of

TSC. This demonstrates the interconnectedness of these communities, much like the long reach of Eddie Ellis and his colleagues' work. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the advocacy and educational experiences, whether during or after incarceration, are developing powerful and effective formerly incarcerated leadership.

TSC positions itself as arts in service of advocacy to transform the criminal legal system and to change the way the public views people who are justice-involved. The next chapter of this dissertation focuses on the theoretical concepts that speak directly to TSC's choice of arts as advocacy.

Chapter III

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction: “There is no killing the strong Black woman”

One of the first times I saw TSC perform, I was taken with a scene entitled “Strong Black Woman,” written by a TSC ensemble member who was moved by a poem circulating on the Internet called “The Strong Black Woman Is Dead” (2000) by poet Laini Mataka.¹ Mataka’s poem articulates a litany of traumatic experiences, abuses, and the weight of oppressive gender and social circumstances, including racism, that Black women contend with daily. At the end of the poem, Mataka reiterates that “The strong silent, talking black woman is dead!” but then offers up a challenge: “Or is she still alive and kicking? I know I am still here” (Mataka, n.p.).

TSC’s “Strong Black Woman” is a rejoinder to Mataka’s interrogation, engaging in a dialogue not only with the poet but also with the public space or sphere responsible for generating the harmful discourses and social constraints imposed on Black women.

TSC, too, shares evidence that the strong Black woman is far from departed:

¹ According to the website of Laini Mataka’s publisher Black Classics Press, her poem “The Strong Black Woman Is Dead” was “hijacked from a website on which Laini and other poets shared their work with connected ‘listeners.’ One ‘listener’ liked the poem so much, she sent it across the Internet signed with her name instead of Laini’s. This poem still shows up attached to emails, most often without the original thief’s name, instead signed ‘anonymous’” (Black Classics Press, para. 2). The poem is part of Mataka’s poetry collection, *Bein’ a Strong Black Woman Can Get U Killed??*

SWEETNESS: There are rumors that a strong black woman is dead.

TATARIA: But could a strong black woman die or does something have to kill her?

ARLENE: She survived rape, incest, abandonment, incarceration, racism, oppression and poverty.

TAMI: She went from hopelessness to freedom, from unemployment to a career.

LINDA: Her deferred dreams are merely temporary delays.

SISTER X: Because her heart takes her places her mind could never.

DENISE: I submit she is deliberately alive; for there is no killing the strong black woman.

TATARIA: Her beginning has been established, and her end is nowhere in sight.

The “Strong Black Woman” scene touches on the conditions of Black women’s lives presented in the “The Strong Black Woman Is Dead,” in TSC’s words: “rape, incest, abandonment, incarceration, racism, oppression and poverty.” The scene shifts Black women’s positions from victims of structural violence to the agents and architects of their own life’s paths, where there are no limits to what they can accomplish. This scene is a useful jumping-off point to scaffold a conceptual framework that reflects the layered meanings and themes found in this scene and throughout TSC’s works, while also providing an analysis of the role of personal storytelling for women of color who have come into conflict with the justice system.

Structural and Institutional Violence, Invisibility, and Intersectional Identities

“The life of an individual cannot be adequately understood without reference to the institutions within which his biography is enacted” (p. 161), as the distinguished sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) instructed. When Mills referenced institutions, he was

speaking of them as a broad sociological term that encompasses environments, social contexts, and “larger structural frameworks” (p. 162). As demonstrated throughout this project, this is acutely true for women of color who have been in contact with the justice system. Institutions and structures shape their experiences, physical and mental health, safety, and their own and families’ well-being before, during, and after their incarceration. Their contact with or lack of involvement from institutions can play a significant role in their justice system involvement.

Beth Richie (2012) presented a framework for the different kinds of violence, aggression, and hostility located within the interlocking spheres of women’s lives: interpersonal, community, social, institutional, and state violence (p. 155). While perpetrators of violence, emotional abuse, or control are customarily thought of as individuals, some perpetrators act on behalf of institutions to constrain, marginalize, or silence women (forms of violence that are social/psychological rather than physical), or the perpetrators’ violence is accepted or condoned by the institution within which the violence takes place. This is how institutions become implicated in violence (Price, 2012; Richie, 2012). Richie’s examples of institutional violence included the abuses that take place within prison by guards who sexually assault or violate women. Price explained that state institutions (e.g., law enforcement, courts, child protective services) whose responsibilities are to serve and protect the public are the loci of violence through their direct actions (e.g., police brutality) or their failure to take action to protect vulnerable populations (e.g., women and children of color), resulting in, as Price (2012) put it, “collud[ing] with batterers by doing nothing” (p. 2).

In addition to institutions, other pervasive and systemic forces and factors can limit, constrain, and negatively impact an individual's life course. These structural factors, such as racism, gender oppression, and intergenerational poverty, are challenging to identify and therefore challenging to dismantle, since they often traverse institutions, interpersonal and social relations, living conditions, and organizational and daily practices/interactions. They are also further embedded in ideologies and histories, which thereby render them invisible (Dilts, 2012, p. 191). Theorists have referred to these pervasive and embedded impacts as *structural violence*, which includes institutional violence. In this line of thinking, the meaning of violence is broadened. Peace theorist Johan Galtung (1969) devised the term *structural violence* to refer to the conditions that create a gap between a person's potential and the externally created circumstances that curtail the realization of that potential. From this perspective, there is no concrete agent of the violence or a single force that enacts it; rather, it is diffuse yet persistent, and entrenched in social, political, or economic arrangements (Dilts, 2012, p. 192).

A structural violence concept that particularly resonates with Richie's analysis of violence against Black women is Galtung's attention to the "failure to prevent injury, pain, and suffering" (Dilts, 2012, p. 195). Richie conveyed both the indirect mode of structural violence and the direct forms of violence perpetrated by individuals and state institutions in order to show the conditions of many justice-involved women's lives. Richie and other scholars such as Sudbury (2005), Travis (2002), Mauer and Chesney-Lind (2002), Solinger, Johnson, Raimon, Reynolds, and Tapia (2010), Nixon et al. (2008) and Boudin (2011), as well as the artists, activists, and writers who focus their work on the impacts and injustices of mass incarceration, focused heavily on a second structural

violence concept, “the inequality of power, resources, and life opportunities” (Dilts, 2012, p. 195) that justice-involved people face before and after they are incarcerated.

As referenced in Chapter I, the collateral consequences of mass incarceration, i.e., the post-incarceration policies, surveillance practices, and discrimination that limit the ability of formerly incarcerated people to live a decent quality of life, are an aspect of this structural violence. When we widen the structural violence analysis to institutions and systems of law enforcement and criminal justice that impact women of color’s experiences before, during, and after prison, as well as the intersecting systems of education, public assistance, and mental and physical healthcare, to name a few, that foment inequity, we understand mass incarceration to represent a larger set of economic, political, and social relations, per Wacquant’s (2001) notion of “the extra-penological role of the penal system as instrument for the management of dispossessed and dishonored groups” (p. 97). Davis (as cited in Alfred & Chlup, 2009) cogently explained how the criminal justice system is linked to overarching systemic economic and social conditions, namely intergenerational poverty and social/political exclusion:

[The social conditions generated by the cycle of poverty] are often veiled by being conveniently grouped together under the category “crime” and by the automatic attribution of criminal behavior to people of color. Homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, mental illness, and illiteracy are only a few of the problems that disappear from public view when the human being contending with them are relegated to cages (1998, para I). (p. 240)

Critical race theorists instruct us to look at the central role of racism in producing the structural conditions that systematically marginalize women of color, so that attention is paid equally to race, class, and gender. The racialization and gendering of poverty, and the mechanisms of the justice system that reinforce these conditions, are prime examples

of structural violence that restrict the opportunities for women of color to reach their full potential.

In sum, structural and institutional violence and factors shape the lives of justice-involved women profoundly. In light of the invisibility or lack of recognition of this structural and institutional violence, as Galtung put forth, and of Mills' message that we must understand the life of an individual in terms of the institutions and, in extending Galtung's logic to this, the structures that mold women's lives and identities, it follows, therefore, that understanding the complexities of justice-involved women's lives necessitates focusing on the institutions and accompanying structures that constrain and limit their healing; their personal, family, and community health and well-being; and their agency.

Winter (2012) problematized the invisibility/visibility dichotomy vis-à-vis transforming oppressive structures. He was dubious that the act of simply making structural violence visible will lead to its obliteration (p. 202). He considered that it is perhaps the prevalence and visibility of structural violence that renders it acceptable and familiar. As a result, it is not questioned by society. Expanding on that notion, Dilts (2012) theorized, "Structural violence's invisibility is more likely because of violence's ceaseless repetition in the open rather than because it has been hidden away.... It is the normalcy of everyday violence that enables it to be 'inherited' across generations, and that renders it invisible" (pp. 192-193). According to this logic, narratives of structural violence may not only have little impact, they may actually normalize structural violence. Price (2012) argued that our "dominant culture" (p. 6) may be inured to the violence of economic, racial, and social injustices that are in plain sight, but the "structures

responsible for the violence are also responsible for the cloaking the violence as violence.... In order to see the violence, one must see the structures” (p. 6). How, then, is the normalcy of structural violence disrupted?

**Disrupting the Normalcy of Structural Violence:
Consciousness Raising, Storytelling, and Developing One’s Voice**

As TSC proclaims, “[The Strong Black Woman] went from hopelessness to freedom, from unemployment to a career.” Throughout history, women of color have and continue to resist, overcome, and transform their lives within the constraints of social and institutional injustice. Formerly incarcerated women of color, specifically, have nurtured their internal and community skills and strengths and created strategies that help them move beyond structural constraints, while also helping others to access these skills and strengths to collectively change the imposed narrative about the worth of formerly incarcerated women. As shown later in this study, developing internal and community strength is an iterative process, taking root firmly when individual and collective empowerment practices are interdependent.

Richie’s (2001) qualitative study on the challenges that women face during reentry cited the Freirean-inspired “consciousness raising or empowerment approach” to nurture the development of “critical insight into the structural influences on their personal choices” (pp. 384-385). Expanding consciousness-raising spaces and opportunities as part of the reentry process, i.e., the period of time when people come home from prison and begin to rebuild their lives, cultivates insights into the structures and institutions that created the conditions for women to come into contact with the criminal justice system. The consciousness-raising approach presents a sharp contrast with mainstream reentry

programs that promote self-blame or overly focuses on building self-esteem, which is often the result of directing focus solely on one's status as victim.

Richie (2001) drew from Paulo Freire's (1970) work for insights into subjectivity and agency of the "oppressed," the vocabulary he chose to use to denote the victims of systemic injustices. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire voiced his concern that the oppressed peasants and laborers with whom he worked in Brazil were largely unaware of their situations of oppression, or did not believe that they had the ability to change their situations. The systems and conditions of oppression, he stated, are invisible to those who are its victims. He set forth his theory that the oppressed (or as he referred to them, "dispossessed in Latin America") must develop *conscientização*, or critical consciousness, about the conditions of their oppression, and then engage in a process of transforming their situations for themselves. No one can transform their lives on their behalf. It is through their development of their critical consciousness that they change from objects of oppression to subjects of their own transformation.

Accessing the processes of critical consciousness building is, therefore, a worthwhile project for researchers of structural violence. This type of process-oriented research cannot be adequately measured or quantified using positivist techniques, because it is a project in understanding the subjective experiences at play in the development of critical consciousness and becoming aware of the structures that reign one in. Returning to Mills' attention to considering the impacts of institutions on one's life story, and adopting Freire's approach, critical consciousness is, therefore, built when the oppressed constructs an understanding *for himself or herself* of the impact of structures and institutions on his or her life. Critical consciousness development enables

those who are objects of structural violence not only to make visible and name the conditions that limit her potential, but it also leads to a reframing of the narrative that had normalized the structural violence. The storyteller constructs a new narrative where the structural violence is visible, challenged, and named for what it is: oppressive and unjust.

One such storyteller is Kemba Smith, a formerly incarcerated woman who told her story as a stark illustration of the injustices of the war on drugs and its accompanying truth-in-sentencing and overly stringent drug laws. When Smith was in college, she became involved with a drug dealer who abused her. She was arrested and sentenced to 24½ years in prison for complicity in his drug dealing, even though she never sold or used drugs and had no criminal history (Sentencing Project, “Kemba Smith” section). In 2000, President Clinton commuted her sentence after she had served 6½ years (Sudbury, 2010, p. 15). Smith employed her personal story as a powerful and vivid example of the impacts of harsh and punishing policies and laws. In one essay written while she was in prison, Smith (2005) proclaimed: “Becoming a voice for thousands of first-time, nonviolent drug offenders, I am sure it was something [the government] never expected” (p. 105). Her story was widely publicized thanks to her own, her family’s, the media’s, and activists’ efforts. While incarcerated and after being released, Kemba has written articles and a memoir; has testified before Congress, the United Nations, and other international bodies; and engaged in advocacy efforts to dismantle unjust drug and other criminal justice policies (Sentencing Project, “Kemba Smith” section).

Formerly incarcerated activist and writer Tina Reynolds (2010) shared her experiences of incarceration and the root cause of how she became involved in the justice system:

As I relived my experiences within the criminal justice system, I began to realize that I had been severely traumatized by the *practices and policies exercised upon me and enforced over me while in the jails and prisons.... I realize that the way I had been treated was both dehumanizing and oppressive* [emphasis added]. I took and accepted this treatment as the status quo because I had done wrong, I had committed crimes, and I considered this part of my punishment. After further exploration of why I was arrested and had spent so much time in confinement. I realized my crimes were directly related to my substance abuse.... As I continued to reflect upon my behavior and my state of mind during my addiction, I became angry. *I was not an isolated case* [emphasis added]. (p. 454)

Tina's self-reflective examination of the link between her untreated addiction, which led to her contact with the justice system, and the trauma that she experienced from incarceration is indicative of two conditions at the intersections of race, class, gender, and the criminal justice system. First, Tina called attention to the "practices and policies exercised upon me and enforced over me" (p. 454) that dehumanized and oppressed her, i.e., the institutions of the criminal justice system—law enforcement, the court system, and corrections—whose practices and policies were responsible for her trauma. She also addressed that her drug abuse led to incarceration rather than to treatment. Second, and critical to her epiphany, Tina realized that she shared these experiences with many other women who suffered from enmeshment with these same institutions whose purpose is to punish rather than to provide healing. Tina had an awakening: she saw herself and others like her as situated within a system that was invisible to her in the past, but that is now made visible—and named—by Tina. Naming is an act that can confront Winter's structural violence invisibility versus visibility dichotomy because it reconciles both circumstances. Naming makes that which is obscured or hidden perceptible, and interrogates and problematizes that which is visible, yet unquestioned and normalized (Fine & Weis, 2003).

Tina Reynolds' story did not end with the realization that her trauma and her suffering from addiction and the criminal justice system were experiences that she shared with other incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. Once she was in recovery post-release, she began speaking about her experiences in prison and reentry; she started "narrating the unseen" of structural violence and "connecting the dots" (p. 16), to borrow Sturm and Tae's (2017) language, to educate the public to gain knowledge about what leads people to become involved in the justice system. Tina joined a speakers bureau of a nonprofit advocacy organization and became an activist for policy change, eventually co-founding an organization led by formerly incarcerated women to "transform the lives of women affected by incarceration and works to change public perception about ourselves, our children, and our community in order to create positive policy change" (Reynolds, 2010, p. 457). Tina asserted that there is power and agency for women who struggle under the weight of mass incarceration's collateral consequences in the act of telling their stories to advocate for policy change. Per Sturm and Tae (2017), Tina has employed leadership developed from "understanding what enables personal transformation" to enact change.

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) focused on the employment of personal storytelling in developing counter-narratives to combat a widespread and racist master narrative: that people of color are educationally, culturally, and intellectually deficient. While they wrote in particular about deficits-based narratives and research in education, we have already seen that these racist narratives extend further to representations of people of color in other areas, such as attachment to crime and poverty. From Solórzano and Yosso's perspective, architects of counter-narratives expose the deficits discourses that

serve to preserve the hegemony that positions middle-class White America as hard-working and deserving and low-income people of color as culturally and socially inferior. Instigators of resistance discourses are therefore engaging in precarious and courageous work: “Revealing the deficit discourse in majoritarian stories reveals White privilege, and this often is perceived as a threat from those who benefit from racism” (p. 37). They argued that personal storytelling “turn[s] the margins into places of transformative resistance” (recall hooks’ [1990] virtually identical strategy of resistance from the margins) and creates a “strategy of survival” (p. 37) for those whose voice and agency have been obliterated and devastated historically by the deficits discourse. Thus, from a critical race theory perspective, TSC’s acts of storytelling perpetuates their survival.

Building upon Taylor’s concept of the “politics of recognition” and Hirschman’s identification of “voice” as one primal mode of response for an individual in a negative situation, Arjun Appadurai (2004) considered how the poor specifically, or any marginalized group in general, can develop the cultural capacity of voice so that the recognition of their condition is not tokenized or made abstract, and does not serve to reproduce and reinforce their marginalized conditions. He linked the development of voice to social movements that “change the *terms* [emphasis added] of recognition, indeed the cultural framework itself” (p. 67). Changing the terms of recognition, according to Appadurai, is not only empowering, but also permits the oppressed group to create interventions that alter their situations according to their own frames of reference. The employment of voice or, specifically, storytelling in service of the transformation of one’s situation or to contribute to a social movement is one strategy to avoid cooptation of one’s stories by others who are not directly implicated by oppressive economic,

political, and social relations and conditions. Further, Appadurai called for the necessity of a grassroots development of voice:

We need to strengthen the capacity of the poor² to exercise “voice,” to debate, contest, and oppose vital directions for collective social life as they wish, not only because this is virtually a definition of inclusion and participation in any democracy.... It is the only way in which the poor might find locally and plausible ways to alter what I am calling the terms of recognition in any cultural regime. (p. 66)

Voice developed to change the terms of recognition must first and foremost be authentic to others within the marginalized community, grounded in lived experiences (i.e., *ground truth*, per Sturm & Tae, 2017), and contribute to the public debate.

The link between voice and recognition to precipitate dialogue, action, and mobilization is what enables one’s voice to have power, resonance, and agency. In the examples of the employment of storytelling to effect change that I listed earlier, these impacts were located within both of the spheres that Appadurai articulated: self-mobilization and the destabilization of unchallenged unequal social, political, and economic relations. Kemba Smith, who told her story before Congress and the United Nations, in interviews with print and television journalists, and in a personal memoir, employed her story—her autobiography—to illustrate the injustices of strict sentencing policies in order to repeal them. This is an example of shifting the “dynamics of consensus” (p. 67), per Appadurai, in the public sphere. There is an element of

² Appadurai spoke from the perspective of India’s extreme economic inequality; therefore, the poor are positioned in his work as the “subaltern.” Like Freire, who was writing about poor rural peasants in Brazil to whom he referred as the “oppressed,” Appadurai spoke from a particular context in India. Spivak (in De Kock, 1992) refuted the conflation of the terms oppressed and subaltern. She argued the term *oppressed* refers to someone who has less access to societal resources and goods, while subaltern is someone who has literally no voice, i.e., “cannot speak, [which] means that if speaking involves speaking and listening, this possibility of response, responsibility, does not exist in the subaltern’s sphere” (p. 46). Freire spoke of the oppressed (or peasant class) similarly to the way Spivak defined subaltern.

performativity to Kemba Smith's repeating her story over and over again during speaking engagements. By reliving her past traumas in public settings, she embodies their injustices while challenging the normalcy of stringent punishment.

Imagining New Futures: Narratives and Spaces of Hopes, Dreams, and Liberation

Tina Reynolds voiced concern that her identity might be defined solely by her constant retelling of her story of her experiences of structural violence. Ikemoto (as cited in Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) addressed these very concerns: "By responding only to the standard story, we let it dominate the discourse" (p. 32). Stories that speak not only to structural violence, but also to the richness of lived experiences, hopes, dreams, and accomplishments paint a fuller picture of the complexity and diversity of women impacted by the criminal justice system. Speaking beyond the constraints of the "standard story" of the narratives of oppression and victimization engenders agency, specifically, the individual's ability to both create and frame the terms of their narrative and to move themselves beyond the structures of their oppression.

Audre Lorde (2007) stated that "it is axiomatic that if we [Black women and men] do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others" and spoke valiantly of the "reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us" (p. 43). With the wielding of reclaimed language, the writer (or artist) "takes part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth" (p. 43). Once again, we have a testimony that telling one's story—on one's own terms and in one's own language—is a means of survival and of thriving. The direction of that growth is neither fixed (i.e., predetermined by the past) nor imposed (i.e., bounded by institutional and structural factors) once one has the power to write one's own future.

Davis (2003) viewed transforming the education system as a means of transforming our justice system. Similar to Fine and Weis (2003), who celebrated schools that “[stir] personal transformation and political imagination” (p. 5), Davis imagined schools as sites of caring, learning, and compassion. Education broadly defined—as a process, as personal growth, as empowerment—releases education from the institutions of schooling that are criminalizing youth of color, opening up worlds of possibility. TSC celebrates this in one of their scenes, affirming: “I say; you don’t see the scars of my incarceration; because of education; YOU SEE LIBERATION!” Education as liberation heals the trauma of the institution of incarceration and punishment. Transforming—not merely reforming—the institutions of the criminal justice system and education requires freeing our institutions and society from the vice of entrenched institutional and structural violence. As Freire (1970) instruct/ed, we cannot imagine the alternatives to our current state of society until we create spaces for alternative practices and ways of thinking. This dissertation documented how CCF and TSC are examples of these alternative spaces and practices.

The development of the capacity to aspire is the ability to see many options and possibilities for improving one’s life beyond conditions, structures, and institutions and to know how to enter the path to reach those future destinations. It also means developing the skills and know-how to move oneself along the path. The well-off and powerful might have many more examples of possible futures, the means and knowledge to get onto the paths to those futures, and the dense networks and established pathways to enable them to reach their goals, but they need not have a monopoly on realizing one’s aspirations if the dispossessed can develop this cultural capacity. The development of the

ability to articulate the terms of recognition (voice) is linked to the determination of one's own future (empowerment) and to taking the steps to realize this future (agency).

The rewriting of one's past plays a vital role in rewriting the present and taking charge of one's future; this corresponds to Freire (1970) challenging us not to think of the past as fixed. Quan (2005) referenced Dienstag in speaking about reconceptualizing the past: "political theory is most powerful not when it dictates to us so-called timeless theory principles, but when it reforms our understanding of our past and future" (p. 42). Quan spoke specifically of widening Robinson's seminal 1983 text, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, to include how women have contributed to the Black radical tradition, and described why reimagining the past is a project in recasting a people's collective memory. Western discourse and master historical narratives have pervasively and persistently erased the existence and subjectivity of people of the African diaspora; quoting Schomburg, it is "the missing pages of World history" (p. 51). *Black Marxism* is "a story about the ways in which women and men of the Black diaspora resisted a civilisation, a way of living, a way of thinking, a way of being dominated" (p. 51).

Quan (2005) celebrated *Black Marxism* as an open narrative that invites others to contribute to both the historical narratives it collects as well as to begin where the text has left off. The stories of resistance past, present, and future are invited as collective contributions against the "official tale" (per Robinson). The contributors widen the community of resistance and the communitarian counter-narrative. The stories of resistance are *per se* stories of communities of resistance, rather than of "heroic great men and their individual accomplishments, but by stories of men and women, young and

old, revolting against” generations of subjugation which created, in Robinson’s own words, “collective intelligence gathered from struggle” (as cited in Quan, 2005, p. 46). Quan argued that this is a feminist approach to historical analysis and ways of knowing. A feminist epistemology eschews hierarchy, embraces the contributions of all to resistance discourses, and includes all forms of difference (pp. 50-51).

Applying These Concepts to the Performance of a Life Story

These concepts come together in performance in a particular configuration because of the presence of the audience. In Maisha T. Winn’s *Girl Time: Literacy, Justice, and the School-to-prison Pipeline*, a book written about a theater program for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls in which Winn has participated as an educator, she also cautioned against the misusing the concept of voice. Educators position themselves as *giving voice* to marginalized youth or as marginalized youth *needing to develop their voices* through educators’ curricula and classrooms. Winn argued that youth already have a voice, as well as powerful ideas, and need a space in which to articulate and an active audience with whom they can share their already powerful voices (p. 20).

Winn (2011) employed Madison’s definition of voice from the performance ethnography perspective as

“an embodied, historical self that constructs and is constructed by a matrix of social and political processes” (Madison, 2005, p.173). Therefore, voice is not neutral; it is a complex intersection of how one views him- or herself as well as how one is viewed by external forces. (p. 20)

Madison’s definition of voice is one that is an accumulation of social and political processes and experiences and historical conditions that are not just an identity; they are embodied. In the case of formerly incarcerated women, the prison experience assaults the

body and the psyche. Reentry, in the form of surveillance and management systems, is a continuation of the criminal justice system; it still imposes control over people after they leave prison. Furthermore, according to Nixon et al. (2008), the criminal justice system is grounded historically in “legacies of racism, civil death, and perpetual punishment that make criminal justice more aptly defined as a system of *criminal punishment*” (p. 22). The voices of formerly incarcerated women of color are, therefore, grounded in this experience of punishment and as a continuation of historical structural violence, but this does not mean that they are voiceless nor that they need those in power to give them their voice. They embody an accumulation of historical resistance, survival, strength, and collective intelligence, per Quan (2005), which is another facet of their voices.

Winn’s (2011) contention that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls should have spaces and opportunities to share their voices is realized in the Girl Time theater program, which is housed within a women-focused theater company whose mission is to develop women’s theater writing and roles. The program provides spaces and opportunities for girls to develop and employ their voice: in theater games, activities, and movement, as well as being within a community that nurtures women’s cultural expression. Girl Time is providing those spaces and opportunities on a variety of levels, including in the theater workshop’s safe space where the girls and the educators engage in personal storytelling and writing, and on stage performing their finished pieces to audiences of peers and family and community members. In this way, theater enables the interplay between the personal voice and the public perception of this voice in multiple spheres of engagement: each member of the workshop engages with the group and then the group engages with their audience during a performance. Similarly, the TSC

ensemble provides a space for ensemble members to engage with each other's personal stories. The ensemble performs in more intimate and safe, yet still public, spaces of College and Community Fellowship (CCF) graduations. As stated earlier, they also perform in much less intimate public settings such as universities and national conferences.

Appadurai (2004) referred to performativity as a necessary tool for voice to take root and shift the dominant cultural narrative that has historically been imposed on silenced and marginalized groups. As a reminder, Appadurai was working from the development perspective of deeply entrenched poverty. His concept of performativity in service of changing the frame of public debate is portable to other marginalized communities who are social movement builders:

As the poor seek to strengthen their voices as cultural capacity, they need to find those levers of metaphor, rhetoric, organization, and public performance that work best in their cultural worlds.... [A]s we have seen with various movements in the past, they change the terms of recognition, indeed the cultural framework itself. So, there is no shortcut to empowerment. It has to take some local cultural form to have resonance, mobilize adherents, and capture the public space of debate. (p. 67)

Furthermore, performance mobilizes the group from within, alters public discourse, and enables self-representation to take hold externally. Dovetailing with Madison's concept of voice as both endogenous and exogenous, performance therefore has intrinsic and extrinsic value in shifting the terms of recognition. Theatrical performance has the potential to embody and thereby to contest socially sanctioned normative behaviors, discourses, and power relations (Boal, 1979). Theater can also enable the public enactment of the capacity to aspire and alter the public discourse.

I want to define the style of theater that most closely aligns with TSC. Cohen-Cruz (2005) presented a number of definitions of community theater, demonstrating that there are not only diverse ways of defining community theater but, also, diverse ways of understanding and ascribing meaning to these practices. What resonates with TSC is community-based theater “in response to a collectively significant issue of circumstance” (p. 2) and “oriented towards ‘community development’” (p. 4). Cohen-Cruz also showed that some community-based theater practices are integrated with education and political engagement, such as community organizing (p. 5). Other aspects that resonate with TSC is the theater’s valuable role in partnership with institutions and organizations engaged in social justice work. In the case of CCF and TSC, ensemble members have all been served by or work for CCF as fellows, alumna, or staff; thus, this constitutes a complementary relationship. I find that the mechanisms and practices that make TSC effective are similar to what makes CCF successful, and I explore this in the next chapter.

Augusto Boal (1979) offered his reflections on the role of theater in instigating revolutionary change. He referenced Brecht’s attention to the role of the audience, or spectator. The spectator must be actively engaged in imagining different worlds alongside the performers. He or she must see the possibility in rewriting and transforming the world as it stands—a world where the familiar narrative is one of oppression. “The *poetics of the oppressed* is essentially the poetics of liberation: the spectator no longer delegates power to the character either to think or act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theater is action!” (p. 155).

The collectively charted counter-narrative, when publicly enacted, invites the audience to participate, if there is resonance, with empathy and shared meaning for them.

TSC's first audiences were CCF graduations and then expanded their audiences within New York City to include conferences, universities, arts and performance venues, and correctional facilities. These audiences were diverse, including advocates, social workers, concerned community members, government workers and leaders, academics, people working in the criminal justice system, people trying to change the criminal justice system, students (both formerly incarcerated and not formerly incarcerated), artists, and incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. During the post-performance discussions, some audience members shared similar life stories or felt that TSC's stories resonated with their own situations, although they may be at very different places along their own journey. A TSC performance has the potential to alter an audience member's trajectory, whether it is through prompting the rereading of their past or changing the orientation of their future.

TSC's performance of "Strong Black Woman" is deeply symbolic within the context of the institutional and structural violence through which TSC's members have lived. The scene is a recognition of their struggle for survival within what was once a fixed set of circumstances. However, in adopting the perspective of hope and a belief that they could not only envision a different future, but also embody and live that future vision in their personal and professional lives (and relive it again and again on stage), they are breaking the cycle of structural violence and transforming oppressive institutions. They also leave themselves and their audiences with a future orientation of possibility, an end that is "nowhere in sight" because they are in a process of authoring it for themselves each day in their lives and work, and collaboratively authoring the future as an ensemble and a community.

The Dialogic Process: Defining and Articulating Key Terms

After an ensemble member who goes by the name of Sweetness read the draft opening chapter of this dissertation, she texted me about the thoughts that ran through her mind during her reading. “Capacity—you like that word? I like ability,” she asserted. This kicked off a text discussion on the differences between these words. These differences matter to this study, so I open the discussion on this language further, thanks to Sweetness’s attention to these terms.

Sweetness relayed that she liked the term *ability* because “it can empower and enlighten when we feel [its impact].” My reading of Sweetness’s conception of the word is that ability is a personal resource that one develops, and ability activates one’s agency. Developing abilities that activate agency for people whose families and communities have been starved of resources to develop them—for example, the ability to read, to get a quality education, and to develop expertise needed for professions—cannot be taken for granted. In the case of TSC, developing abilities such as gaining college and graduate degrees and activating critical consciousness and “social and political empowerment”—another set of terms with which Sweetness connected—are underlying themes that came out of our interviews and focus groups and can be found throughout TSC’s material. Developing abilities lays the groundwork for achieving personal, social, and political empowerment.

I suggested to Sweetness that other abilities—or personal resources—might be knowledge, wisdom, and “know-how” (or competence). When I use the word capacity, it denotes the importance of being able to deploy those abilities in a context that allows people to attain their potential. As I wrote to Sweetness, “to me, capacity is the ability to

execute one's abilities." This capacity includes social systems and institutions that variously enable or hold people back from realizing their potential and applying their abilities in social, political, professional, and other arenas. I drew this understanding from Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence as the entrenched and persistent conditions in society that keep groups of people from achieving their potential.

Sweetness's questioning of my terms inspired me to look a little more deeply at the ideas behind what I wanted to convey about the importance of capacity development for people impacted by mass incarceration, racism, and the punishment system. I aspired to find language that would help me describe the conditions needed for people to develop their internal abilities in an environment where they could apply their abilities in order to reach their full potential. I found resonance in Nussbaum's (2001) theory of *human capabilities*: "what people are actually able to do and to be" (p. 6).

Nussbaum (2001) developed this theory as a standard for how to ensure that the international community could create a threshold for human dignity for women in the developing world. She developed her theories in partnership with many groups of women with whom she worked in the developing world. Nussbaum found kinship with economist Amartya Sen's work on capability as a way in which the quality of life can be compared. Instead of measuring access to and accumulation of resources or wealth, Nussbaum and Sen focused on what a person is capable of achieving—"what she is in a position to do (what her opportunities and liberties are)," per Nussbaum, and the *capabilities* necessary for individuals to achieve their desires and aspirations. The purpose of defining a set of capabilities that all human beings should be able to achieve is

to define what it means to live a life of dignity and to be fully human. She referenced Aristotle and Marx to explain this central notion:

The core idea is that of the human being as a dignified free being who shapes his or her own life in cooperation and reciprocity with others.... A life that is really human is one that is shaped throughout by these human powers of practical reason and sociability. (p. 74)

Nussbaum defined 10 capabilities or freedoms that she held are required in order to live a life of dignity. These capabilities include the physical, e.g., health and well-being and freedom of movement; the internal/emotional, e.g., reason, happiness, creativity, and play; and the social and political, e.g., education and control of one's social, material, and political decisions and affiliation. She further contended that reason and affiliation are uniquely human and underpin the other capabilities; importantly, she delineated three levels of capabilities: basic, internal, and combined. Basic capabilities are what human beings are born with (e.g., the capabilities for speech, language, and reason) and serve as the starting point for the development of the next level of capabilities, which Nussbaum called internal capabilities. These internal capabilities are what human beings can cultivate and that require development (e.g., emotional maturity, education, and spiritual development). Third, she laid out the concept of combined capabilities, "defined as internal capabilities *combined with* suitable external conditions for the exercise of the function" (pp. 84-85).

Nussbaum (2001) clarified that although internal and combined capabilities can overlap one another, they have distinctions that lead to material consequences:

Developing an internal capability usually requires favorable external conditions; indeed, it very often requires practicing the actual function. Nonetheless, the distinction does real work, because even a highly trained capability can be thwarted. (p. 85)

Nussbaum offered some examples to illustrate the differences. For example, a woman who has skills and desires to work outside of the home may be prevented by her family or society from exercising her will to work. The blurriness between internal and combined capabilities occurs when one's internal capabilities are stunted by their context. For example, a child who does not have access to education that cultivates freedom of thought or speech does not develop the combined capability as an adult needed to uphold a free society.

The interrelationship between the development of internal capabilities and combined capabilities resonates very much with this project. Internal capabilities are akin to what Sweetness referred to as abilities, and combined capabilities are analogous to what I referred to as capacity. Applied to the U.S. context of the life opportunities for formerly incarcerated people, their abilities (internal capabilities) and capacities (combined capabilities) are very much interrelated. Incarcerated people average lower educational attainment than the general population (Davis et al., 2013, p. xv). As shown in this conceptual framework, their abilities have been curtailed by external factors, such as the disinvestment of low-income communities of color; the concentration of violence and crime in their neighborhoods (as shown by Eddie Ellis and his colleagues); and the lack of educational equity before their incarceration, which increase the likelihood that they will become incarcerated. Second, once they come home, formerly incarcerated people of color face a web of policies and practices—the collateral consequences of a criminal conviction—that keep them from realizing their full potential, even when they try to better themselves through educational attainment. The development of abilities and capacities for low-income people of color is interrelated. Their lack of access to

opportunities for internal capabilities development and the lack of combined capabilities due to historical, institutional and social oppression and violence are intertwined.

Nussbaum (2001) also wrote about the relationship between social justice and institutions such as marriage and education. Writing from an international context, she referenced the criminal justice system as it relates to prostitution and violence against women but did not address issues of mass incarceration in the United States. However, her analysis of the relationship between institutions and social justice is appropriate to the U.S. setting:

My capabilities approach suggests that public policy should devote particular attention to any institution whose influence on the formation of capabilities is profound, since a bare minimum of social justice will involve bringing citizens up to a threshold level of capability. (p. 246)

The formation of capabilities—or the limitation of capabilities—of entire populations by the education and criminal justice systems is well-documented. These institutions have become symbols of racial injustice in the United States. They are also targets of policy change by people of color impacted by either or both systems who are now driving social movement agendas.

Circling back to Nussbaum's (2001) admission that "developing an internal capability usually requires favorable external conditions; indeed, it very often requires practicing the actual function" is key to understanding TSC's theory of change that is presented throughout this research study. What Nussbaum introduced here—the idea that, at times, combined capabilities can be realized when one exercises their internal capabilities—is at the heart of the movement to end mass incarceration led by formerly incarcerated people, as discussed earlier in Chapter II. The internal capabilities that have been curtailed by mass incarceration are best developed by the people who have been

impacted by this, and are best developed through their exercising of leadership and creative vision in transforming the combined capabilities, i.e., the political and social context that enabled mass incarceration to take hold. This concept is best illustrated in an article written by Vivian Nixon, the Executive Director of CCF, and her colleagues called “Life Capacity Beyond Reentry: A Critical Examination of Racism and Prisoner Reentry Reform in the U.S.” Nixon et al. (2008) wrote:

African Americans and people of color are differently marked by having been in prison, mass incarceration has constituted what we would describe as *a devalued population*, a population of *prisoners-in-reentry*. In this context, racism surely needs to be a primary concern in any analysis of reentry policy and practice.... (p. 26)

A little later, they clearly linked the injustices perpetrated by the institution of reentry to the curtailment of an entire population’s human potential:

What we are referring to as a *population racism* that *devalues* the population of *prisoners-in-reentry* concerns us especially for the way it serves to limit access to education and the development of capacities and potential. (p. 27)

When applying Nussbaum’s (2001) framework to Nixon et al.’s (2008) ideas, one can see that the population of prisoners-in-reentry is kept from living dignified and fulfilling lives. They are forever marked as deficient, and social and political institutions *and* the individuals who control and propagate these institutions presuppose this population to be in constant need of surveillance, control, management, and rehabilitation. Borrowing Nussbaum’s words, being a prisoner-in-reentry inherently limits “what she is in a position to do (what her opportunities and liberties are)” (p. 71).

Nixon and her colleagues (2008) proposed a solution in line with Nussbaum’s (2001) capabilities approach but employed the term *capacities* instead. They called for a restorative approach that would empower, rather than limit the potential of, people in

reentry by creating new practices, institutions, and policies designed to nurture their “capacities for development, creativity, and leadership—the capacities to live life, to live it creatively” (pp. 26-27). The authors were almost all formerly incarcerated leaders who personally experienced the transformative impacts of higher education. They spoke from this personal experience and theorized that the type of education they called for is life-long learning and personal, social, and political development that includes leadership opportunities, civic participation, and organizing: “Our hope is that *prisoners-in-reentry* will not only be a population to be studied, assessed, evaluated, and managed, but will be listened to, followed, and promoted” (pp. 37-38).

Finally, Nixon et al. viewed their leadership and organizing activities as essential drivers of structural change for a more just and democratic society: “[W]e begin to sense for ourselves the transformative power of collective social and political change as we feel an internal desire for a new kind of governing for all” (pp. 38-39). Ultimately, by cultivating formerly incarcerated people’s leadership, education, and creativity, they will develop the tools/abilities and opportunities to redesign systems, such as public safety and education, to be more just while also engaging in the practices of truly democratic freedoms. By, per Nussbaum (2001), engaging in the development of *internal capabilities* or, per Nixon et al. (2008), of *capacities* to live life fully and creatively, those who have not been able to do so in the past have the potential to alter their political and social context radically.

While defining my terms, I was led to articulate more fully this capacities/capabilities approach theory of change, thanks to Sweetness’s inquiry about my choice of language. This theory of change undergirds CCF and TSC equally, and both are

expressions and living examples of the fulfillment of the development of the capabilities/capacities of leadership, education, creativity, and voice. This underscores the richness and value of the action research “spiral” that I discuss in my next chapter on methodology.

Integrating the Conceptual Framework: A Structure for Analysis

I began this chapter with TSC’s “Strong Black Woman” scene as an illustration of the content and themes of TSC’s material. The scene is a collective story of transformation, not only of the collective life stories of ensemble members, but also of the women that these stories represent—women who persisted in their hope and cultivated their agency in order to move beyond the suffering and limitations imposed by the layers of systemic injustices that had beaten them down. The literature that I incorporated into this conceptual framework reflected the scene’s themes and helped create a structure for data analysis, synthesis, and dialogue that I employed over the course of this research project and which I now outline.

Nussbaum (2001) proposed that a woman’s threshold for human dignity is what she is capable of achieving: “what she is in a position to do (what her opportunities and liberties are),” while Nixon et al. (2008) defined living life fully and creatively as having the capacity to engage in civic dialogue, leadership roles, higher education, self-organizing, and engagement in public action (p. 37). Dignity and freedom to live a quality of life, therefore, speak to women’s agency, access, and potential. When a formerly incarcerated woman has structures for opportunities to access to education, relationships, institutions, civic dialogue, role models, collaborators, resources, and so on

that support the development of her capacities/capabilities, such as critical consciousness, voice, counter-storytelling, and affirmative ways of defining her own identities and proclaiming her self-worth, she loosens the grip of injustice, racism, and inequality. As an activist, a leader, a professional, and a storyteller, she realizes her potential, moves her life forward, gives back to her community, informs policy, and influences public dialogue. Moreover, while the circumstances of her constraints still persist on a societal level, she is changing the terms of her recognition in the public sphere by changing the narrative of what it means to be a formerly incarcerated person, transforming into a person not defined solely by her past. Systems of punishment curtailed her life opportunities until she found her way to hope, dream, graduate from college, and become a professional. Her performance of the embodiment of this transformation is what enables her to alter the cultural framing that acknowledges the failures of mass incarceration, but, more importantly, allows her to live a life of quality, dignity, and freedom.

As I discuss throughout this dissertation, the individual well-being of ensemble members is interdependent with the well-being of their community. Appadurai (2004) theorized that changing the terms of recognition in order to change the cultural framework was an important part of social movement building. Social movements are by their very nature collective endeavors that take place in the public sphere. To be successful, they must be coordinated and sustained over time. Likewise, TSC feels they are most powerful when their performances reflect their collective identity.

Chapter IV

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY, AND DATA ANALYSIS

Neither the conditions and impacts of structural violence nor the personal, interpersonal, community, and social transformation addressed in Theater for Social Change (TSC) material and performances can be adequately represented through quantitative data. Quantitative data collection fails to capture the lived experiences or processes of structural violence, critical consciousness raising, or becoming part of a social movement. Consequently, this motivates TSC and many others to seek to disseminate their lived experiences through storytelling, artistic expression, and other qualitative methods.

Travis (2002) noted that the invisibility of the collateral consequences of mass incarceration extends to the lack of quantifiable data that serve to make these effects visible. It is virtually impossible to paint a nuanced picture of mass incarceration's impact using statistical data and figures; these cannot sufficiently represent the suffering and marginalization created by this system. Travis emphasized that we have no way to count the number of people who are disqualified from social and other services because these services are administered by agencies that are "far-flung, have little or no connection with the criminal justice system, may or may not keep records of their decisions, and have no incentives to report on these low-priority exercises of discretion" (p. 26). Moreover, to

assess the full impact of complex and intersecting structural consequences on top of institutional consequences that lead to social exclusion, Winter (2012) instructed not to take a positivist methodological approach (i.e., commonly in the form of putting forth a hypothesis and collecting quantifiable data to prove or disprove this hypothesis) because it limits the focus to *agentive intentionality* and *visibility* (p. 196), which are implicitly absent from structural violence. He warned against the “fetishization of the visible” and advised instead to employ a methodology that can uncover that which is invisible and “goes beyond the basic juridical grammar that presupposes an intentional agent as violence’s perpetrator” (p. 197).

Earlier, I spoke of the processes of critical consciousness building coupled with action as a tool and mechanism for moving beyond the shackles of structural violence. This is the Freirean concept of praxis. This type of process-oriented research is not adequately measured or quantified using positivist techniques, since it constitutes a project in understanding the subjective experiences at play in the development of critical consciousness and of becoming aware of the structures that rein one in. Returning to Mills’ (1959) attention to considering the impacts of institutions on one’s life story, and adopting Freire’s (1970) approach, critical consciousness is therefore created when the victim of violence constructs an understanding *for himself or herself* of the impact of structures and institutions on his or her life.

Equally important, though, is documenting and understanding the process of re-envisioning oneself not as a victim, but as the driver of one’s own life and dreams, capable of not only pushing back against the violence but of transforming the institutional and structural perpetrators into new avenues and spaces of possibility, hope, and

empowerment. This is the transformation and resilience that TSC embodies, enacts, and performs. This dissertation was intended to be a research *process* in exploring the way that ensemble members understand their own transformation, empowerment, and roles as change agents, and how the theater ensemble enables this and serves as an engine to move their dreams and goals forward, for themselves and to inspire others. The qualitative approach was, therefore, appropriate for such a project.

The strength of qualitative methodologies lies in their ability to study and describe “social phenomena,” including social interactions and contexts in “natural settings,” according to “the meanings that the participants themselves attribute to these interactions and the contexts and institutions in which they move through the world” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 2). Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2006) found three overarching strands that emerge in qualitative research, which include *individual lived experience*, *society and culture*, and *language and communication* (p. 3). Each of these strands necessitates different types of qualitative research methods (e.g., narrative study to investigate individual lived experience; action research to study society and culture; discourse analysis to study written text). A study of TSC is, in many ways, research that incorporates all of these strands, and this demonstrates the need to integrate a variety of qualitative methods in order to accomplish the goals of the study.

The Action Research Methodology

Action research was the most fitting methodology for this research project, as a method that “shifts its locus of control in varying degrees from professional and academic researchers to those who have been traditionally called the subjects of research”

(Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 2). Herr and Anderson emphasized that action research is a purposeful and systematic “reflective process” (p. 3) that builds into the process the aims of shifting practices or actions that a community or organization has, will, or plans to undertake. Kemmis and McTaggart (2007) argued that this reflective process is both social and educational at its core: “*If practices are constituted in social interaction between people, changing practices is a social process*” (p. 277). The act of reflecting on social relations and practices is pedagogical. Both the researcher(s) and community partners should benefit and grow equally from these social and educational processes (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007). Marshall and Rossman (2006) argued that if action research is executed properly, it “creat[es] a democratic inquiry process” (p. 7).

Another aspect of action research optimal to my study is the commitment to social justice. TSC, College and Community Fellowship (CCF), and I share the same goals of changing the punitive nature of the justice system and employing our work to transform the unequal and unjust social, criminal justice, and education policies that create structural and institutional violence in the lives of women and their families. We also share a commitment to replacing oppressive structures and institutions with ones that enable family and community well-being and foster social, emotional, and intellectual growth. Kemmis and McTaggart (as cited in Herr & Anderson, 2015) spoke of how the goals of social justice are embedded in the aims of many action research projects, which presuppose the commitment to have authentic collaboration and to engage in a process that critically examines the actions of the group (pp. 4-5). Social justice and democratic practices must be embedded in the relationships and processes of an action research project for this to yield the changes in practice that are inherent in authentic participatory

research. Recall hooks' (1990) desire to operate from "that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer" (p. 24). Action research partners working in true solidarity will be democratic and liberatory and will move beyond the binary power relations that have historically served to dehumanize and separate us.

It is instructive to think more deeply about what action research practitioners and theorists mean by action. Kemmis and McTaggart (2007) reflected on what constitutes action, and how the experience of participating collectively to undertake an action research project might impact members of the collective. They viewed political activism, processes of developing agency, and social behavior as embedded in the action of action research, enabling:

growth and development in participants' expertise, support, commitment, confidence, knowledge of the situation, and understanding of what is prudent (i.e., changed thinking), it also encourages growth and development in participants' capacity for action, including direct and substantial collective action that is well justified by the demands of local conditions, circumstances, and consequences. (p. 278)

Freire (1970) taught action researchers much about the critical examination undertaken in partnership between those directly impacted by social injustices and those who are allies in the project to dismantle and reconstruct unequal social relations and power structures (Herr & Anderson, 2015). During his work with literacy specialists in Chile, Freire (1970) created a method of inquiry called "thematic research." Through the partnership between the researchers and adult learners, they produced themes that the community viewed as critically important to its well-being. The process was instrumental in increasing the literacy of those in the community while also "engag[ing] in social critique and social action" (p. 17). This mirrors the process of TSC, whose members

critically examine their lives and the forces and factors that have shaped their biographies while shaping a social critique. The action comes into play when their performances are utilized to engage their audiences in a variety of ways, which this research project sought to document.

Emphasizing the action in action research means that there is a commitment in this project to enable TSC to reflect on its past, present, and/or future directions. It allowed a focus on how its written texts and performances, aspirations, experiences, and practices inform each other. In this project, action had relational, pedagogical, and reflective connotations. Earlier, I discussed Audre Lorde's (2007) vision of writing, dreaming, and artistic expression as actions that give birth to flourishing, nourishment, and personal growth. Freire (1970) likewise viewed praxis as critical consciousness development put into action to transform the world. TSC's actions are inherent in its artistic, leadership, and pedagogical practices. Therefore, the "action" to which I refer is one that transforms artistic, community, and professional practices; in this case, the reflective process aimed at growth and collaborative learning is the action.

Herr and Anderson (2015) cited the work of two research teams to elaborate on the process of action research. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) based their work on Habermas' theories of communicative action and emancipatory knowledge. De Schutter and Yoppo (cited in Herr & Anderson, 2015) outlined aspects of participatory research that include committing to a dialogic partnership between researcher and subjects and taking into consideration historical and macrolevel factors and forces that affect social processes and structures. I incorporated these key strategies that they described and employed them in this dissertation project. First, in action research, the boundaries

between theory and practice are blurred; practice informs theory and theory informs practice. I argue that this integrated theory and practice is already embedded in TSC's work and processes. Second, through dialogue between TSC and me, I aimed to obliterate the traditional subject-object relationship between researcher and research subject and to become inquiry partners whose subjectivity is equally valued and reported. Finally, the collaborative inquiry aimed to give participants a chance to reflect on their life journeys and how and why being involved in TSC has shaped these journeys, with the purpose of, per Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), producing "emancipatory knowledge" (p. 17) that can transform the injustices of our unequal institutions and society and alter practice and social relations through "examining the relationship between knowledge, identity, agency, and practice" (p. 17).

Action Research Methodology in Practice

As noted in Chapter I, I found that the most authentic aspect of this action research partnership was realized during the pre-dissertation research phase, a time period that lasted about a year before I began writing my dissertation proposal. I wanted the group to get to know me, and I wanted to get to know the group so that we could build the trust and comfort needed to communicate openly if there was any conflict or discomfort with the process. This took place even before I began engaging the group in discussions about co-developing the research questions and process. I scheduled short meetings with the group at the end or beginning of rehearsals. With the group's advance permission, I observed a few rehearsals. I attended many performances in New York City and out of state and observed workshops that TSC held with students. I followed up with small-group brainstorming meetings when it became impossible to get the entire group

together at one time. Some of the conversations we held were exploratory with respect to the research process. Some conversations were enjoyable opportunities to get to know each other.

By the end of this process, based on our many conversations, I created a research proposal that the group reviewed and approved. The approval process also involved discussing types of products that we could publish together after my dissertation was completed. I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and began scheduling interviews. Because the group was entering a very busy time with rehearsals, jobs, and family commitments, it took some time to schedule all of the interviews; one interview never took place because the ensemble member was unable to fit it into her schedule. Likewise, it took a long time to schedule focus groups, and we had to divide the group into three different small focus groups due to scheduling challenges.

After I completed the research phase, I analyzed my data and wrote an analytical memo for each ensemble member who had participated in an interview. The process of engaging in memo feedback differed for each member. Six ensemble members responded with feedback and exchanged ideas over email or phone, or both. Two did not respond to my memo at all. Two ensemble members met with me for in-person follow-up conversations.

When looking back at my field notes, I noticed that the frequency and quality of my engagement with the ensemble during the pre-dissertation research phase was essentially a participant observation process. When I was able to attend rehearsals and meetings and to accompany the group “on the road,” my research became an extension of what the ensemble was already engaged in doing. We could hold conversations in real

time about what was taking place within the ensemble and before and after performances. However, from the time I finished writing the proposal until the review of dissertation drafts, it was much harder to engage in an ongoing dialogue and co-creation process.

There were two reasons why it was harder to engage in the action research spiral once the pre-dissertation phase ended. First, once research meetings had to be scheduled separately outside of TSC work, the equal research partnership that I had proposed—and idealized to a certain extent—did not transpire as planned. We often fell into the conventional dynamic of researcher and subjects who were more often reacting to my analysis rather than engaging in the research spiral. There were a few times when I felt that I was truly engaging in an intellectual dialogue with some ensemble members (see Chapter III for an example of a dialogue with Sweetness that influenced the direction of the analysis process). Second, the analysis process took much longer than I had anticipated and I lost the intensity of the pre-dissertation phase. Additionally, the ensemble took a hiatus during the second half of my writing phase, so they no longer met as an ensemble. I could not find times to schedule a meeting before or after a time when the ensemble would be meeting or rehearsing.

Reflecting on the very different experiences of the pre-dissertation and formal research phases, I see that action research needs to be understood as an aspirational approach. Despite my best intentions, I was not realistic about the ability of the ensemble to engage as readily in the labor-intensive analysis process. I was successful in engaging in a meaningful partnership during the research proposal creation phase because I was able to embed myself in the ensemble somewhat frequently.

Research Approach, Processes, Sub-questions, and Data Collection

My goals for this qualitative research project were to investigate how and why TSC's community and sisterhood, their creative processes, and their performances enable: (1) healing, recovering oneself and one's dreams, hopes, liberation, and empowerment; and (2) the building of the voice, aspirations, agency, and leadership capacities needed to reach their goals and to transform self and society. In order to investigate this overarching question, I broke this down into the following subquestions:

1. What do TSC ensemble members aspire to achieve, individually and collectively?
2. How does enacting their personal and collective struggles connect to the aspirations of ensemble members, individually and as a whole?
3. What are the elements of TSC's devised theater practice?
4. What does TSC's creative process look like in the course of generating written material, rehearsing, while performing, and during post-performance discussions?
5. How does being a member of the ensemble community and participating in TSC's practice impact members personally, professionally, and as leaders and advocates for social justice and change?

Throughout this research project, I answered these questions through investigating: (a) the individual personal narratives that TSC members drew upon individually and collectively to enact through devised theater; (b) the culture and creative process of TSC and its impact on their roles in social justice, community, and

professional activities in which they are involved; and (c) a critical analysis of their scenes and performances.

Narrative study and critical analysis can play a role in this social justice agenda. I note here that narrative study, action research, and critical analysis (in the form of critical discourse analysis) are often viewed in academic literature as distinct methodologies. However, in practice, such methodologies overlap and are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, employing action research does not necessarily exclude drawing from other qualitative methodologies. I explored the linkages between these methodologies and analyzed how they supported the overarching action research approach, guiding principles, and processes that undergirded this participatory qualitative research study. I undertook a narrative study of the lived experiences of TSC ensemble members gleaned through interviews and focus group data and a critical/discourse analysis of their scripts.

Narrative study. Embedded in this project's research questions and TSC's polemic-in-action is an exploration of the lived experiences of TSC members in relation to how they experience being members of CCF, the ensemble, and developing their identity as student, graduate, scholar, leader, or advocate. Narrative study "begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals" (Creswell, 2007, p. 54). The ensemble members provided the framing for their narrative study, meaning that they chose what to share about personal stories of life events and experiences that impacted their own reimagining of their past, present, and future trajectories. Some ensemble members chose during interviews and focus groups to elaborate on the stories that they performed regularly. Chase's (2005, as cited in Creswell, 2007) description of one approach to narrative study involved investigating "how individuals are enabled and

constrained by social resources, socially situated in interactive performances, and how narrators develop interpretations” (p. 55).

This approach to narrative study resonated with this project’s goal of recounting how social processes and structures variously constrain and enable one’s life trajectory; how the journey of personal struggle is linked to one’s aspirations; and how TSC members analyze, write, and perform these experiences. Levers that alter the trajectories of one’s narrative included critical consciousness development, educational opportunities, advocacy experiences, involvement in CCF and TSC, and leadership development opportunities. Ultimately, these narratives speak to how cultural practices of critical consciousness development, transformation, leadership development, and the like, are shaped, enacted, shared, and disseminated.

Critical theory and analysis. I drew from several traditions of critical theory to undertake critical analysis of TSC’s scenes and post-performance discussion as these related to the everyday micro-interactions and macro-structures that TSC drew upon in its work. Critical theory is a broad framework that represents a variety of intellectual strains of thought, including critical race, queer, feminist, post-structuralism, and neocolonial studies (Creswell, 2007). I situated critical pedagogy theorists hooks and Freire, from whom I drew heavily to shape the theoretical framework of this study, within this tradition. Creswell explained that critical theorists are working from the same tradition as other qualitative theorists who focus on analyzing lived experiences and social interactions that cannot be adequately represented objectively through discrete and numerical data collection.

What sets critical theorists apart from other qualitative researchers is their argument that certain knowledge, subjective experiences, and ways of knowing have been privileged over others within the academy and social science, mirroring the hierarchies and injustices of society at large (Foucault, 1980). Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, and O'Garro Joseph (2005) explained that critical theorists are "generally concerned with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, race, class, gender, religion, education, and sexual orientation construct, reproduce, and or transform social relations" (p. 368). Their work is aimed simultaneously at deconstructing these power dynamics and injustices and changing the distribution of power and resources to yield an equitable society.

Language plays a powerful role in mediating our world. It also provides us with tools to analyze our world critically. As Halliday (1993) argued, language is implicit in the learning process and instrumental in how we make meaning. As a theater group, TSC engages in cultural production utilizing carefully deployed language and critical analysis of the social relations, institutions, structures, and practices that impact its members' lives. This language and critical analysis are the tools TSC uses for counter-storytelling and narrating the unseen. I looked for the patterns and themes found in TSC's scripts and post-performance discussions to show how the ensemble members employ language and reframe the deficits discourse to show the worth and strength of their community.

Action research processes in greater detail and addressing ethical considerations. Per the action research process, I needed to address several areas of engagement within this project to demonstrate what a collaborative inquiry process would look like in practice. First, given that I formulated research themes and questions

to explore based on my observations of and discussions with TSC, it was fundamental for TSC to provide a critical reading and response to the research goals and themes, as well as the processes for undertaking the collaboration. TSC approved of the study proposal before I applied for IRB approval.

While it is a requirement of my degree program that I present my own, original analyses of the research, I also created a process for TSC to provide its reading of the data and analyses to include in the dissertation. For each ensemble member, I created an analytical memo based on her interview(s). I included nascent findings and applied theoretical concepts to each memo. I shared the transcripts of the interviews with each interviewee, asking qualifying questions from the memo-writing process for feedback on the themes and analysis, either in writing, in person, or over the phone. About half of the ensemble members chose to engage with the memo reflection process. These memos and conversations became the building blocks of the multiple early drafts of the dissertation.

Ethical considerations of qualitative research included ensuring the anonymity of the subjects and the confidentiality of the data collected (Creswell, 2007, pp. 141-142). The methodology I proposed provided a mechanism for protecting the confidentiality and agency of all the participants by investing them with the power to limit disclosure of any information that might identify them. This was done by: (a) inviting them to identify the themes, life stories, and personal narratives to discuss; and (b) agreeing that no information quoting them would be used or shared with anyone not already privy to that information without permission. These levels of protection were consistent with and in service of action research's accountability to the project's partners, namely the TSC ensemble.

In this project, it was not possible to guarantee the anonymity of TSC members because they perform regularly in public settings, and some members have positions and are involved in advocacy work that put them in the public spotlight. The group consisted of 12 active ensemble members when I started the proposal process, and one member chose not to participate at all. This meant that 11 members participated in the study, which makes certain aspects of their identity impossible to make anonymous because there are so few ensemble members. I also interviewed the founder of CCF, who was TSC's first facilitator and its former artistic director.

I asked each participant to choose whether they preferred that I use a pseudonym or first name in the dissertation. I guaranteed that the data collected would be kept confidential and securely stored offline in a locked file cabinet. Within the transcripts, I replaced all names with initials. I ensured that ensemble members could leave the study at any time and not feel coerced into being part of the research project at any point in the collaborative inquiry process.

I asked for permission from each ensemble member before including in the dissertation any situations, quotes, or data that might identify her. Some ensemble members asked me to take out certain quotes or information. I took precautions to ensure that nothing personal outside of what was disclosed in a public performance was reported in the study without first asking the ensemble member for permission to include those data. My precautions included giving ensemble members opportunities to read their memos, transcripts, and drafts of the dissertation and to give their consent to the final version being submitted to my institution. This also applied to any publication that I will author or co-author with TSC that derives from the data collected during this project.

In compliance with IRB rules and procedures, I submitted informed consent forms that each TSC member, the artistic director, and the past facilitator reviewed and signed before we began data collection. I secured subjects' signatures prior to each interview. All interviews took place prior to holding focus groups. Data also included documentation of our discussions about memos and dissertation drafts. I asked permission from TSC to use post-performance discussions, which were recorded as data which I analyzed as part of my critical analyses process.

Rigor of the study. Herr and Anderson (2015) presented the following observations about the research process that are specific to action researchers: "Action researchers, like all researchers, are interested in whether knowledge generated from the research is valid or trustworthy, but they are usually also interested in outcomes that go beyond knowledge generation" (p. 61). They argued that strategies to ensure rigor within positivistic or naturalistic research traditions are insufficient to hold an action research project accountable. This is due to the action researcher's emphasis on process and on ensuring that the artificial division between the researcher and research partners and their knowledge production resist the hierarchical (p. 65) or binary organization that hooks found nefarious to the point of creating conditions for dehumanization. What action researchers are concerned with is validity that "include[s] the practical, the political, and the moral" aimed at "asking questions, stimulating dialogue, making us think about just what our research practices are grounded in, and thus what are the significant claims concerning quality we wish to make" (Reason, as cited in Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 66).

To ensure the rigor of this study, I adopted Herr and Anderson's (2015) "Criteria for Quality for Action Research" (p. 65). These criteria included the following.

Process validity. This ensured that the study utilized data collection and process methods that enabled making claims about the research questions and goals. This included adherence to reflection and dialogic processes during the course of the study, analysis, and final product, but also required ensuring that multiple types of data were collected in order to guarantee a variety of perspectives on the research questions. This included interviews, focus groups, analysis of TSC scripts and transcripts of public performance talk-backs, and documentation of memo and draft feedback discussions with participants.

Catalytic validity. This was the level of engagement of the researcher and participants in analyzing the social, political, cultural, and other realities and the assimilation of this newly constructed knowledge to promote change or to deepen their existing understanding and practices. This spoke to the transformative processes that took place during the course of the study, which I carefully documented in order to demonstrate the transformation. I kept notes and documentation of all discussions with TSC and used these as data to review in order to discern the pedagogical processes that took place over the course of the study.

Dialogic validity. This calls on the researcher to create a dialogue process with other action researchers familiar with the community with whom her partnership is to ensure that the analyses and claims were valid. I engaged in a peer review process with other action researchers, who included researchers with expertise in criminal justice system reform and social change. Midway through my coding process, I shared the themes and analysis with these colleagues to engage in a discussion about the emerging findings and whether the possible conclusions I was beginning to draw resonated.

Democratic validity. It is critical that the researcher guarantee an authentic and collaborative partnership with the communities and stakeholders with whom she is partnering. This must also include a commitment to an equal representation of the diversity of voices involved in the study. I paid careful attention to including the voices of all research participants, within the constraints of how much they chose to share about their lives and experiences during their interviews and the focus groups. Finally, I tried to ensure that the study is pertinent to the research partners. I wrote at length about building in a process to ensure that my partnership with TSC was authentic and the research project was relevant to TSC.

Outcome validity. Finally, there was a necessity to see the study through to the completion of the action. The research partnership articulated the goals and I tried to ensure that these goals were met within the confines of the participants' schedules. Part of the initial discussion of my proposal with TSC included creating a clear understanding of and commitment to outlining the expectations and goals and working these goals into the iterative research process.

Data collection and analysis process. Herr and Anderson (2015) maintained that "action researchers are committed to a spiraling synergism of action and understanding" (p. 87). The spiral model also pervaded Kemmis and McTaggart's (2007) strategy and approach to action research: "It is generally thought to involve a spiral of self-reflective cycles" (p. 276) which includes planning, action and observation, reflecting, re-planning, acting again, and re-observing, with the processes continuing on. Action research is iterative, meaning that the dialogic process moves forward through the analysis and re-analysis that happens as each layer of analysis and reflection adds to the study. I engaged

in this iterative analytical process throughout, and, as noted above, with periodic participation from the research participants.

I commenced the spiral by reading transcripts of interviews and focus groups to generate nascent ideas for the coding themes. In NVIVO, I coded for these themes but also engaged in a simultaneous open-coding process. I then combined certain codes and separated other codes into subcodes. I also coded transcripts of TSC talk-backs and a WBAI radio program called *On the Count* that featured TSC ensemble members. From my codes, I re-engaged with my conceptual framework and created memos for each research participant who was actively part of TSC. I emailed each participant her memo and invited her to engage in a discussion about her memos and interview transcripts. I documented the discussions with those ensemble members who engaged in this phase of the process. Some of these discussions involved me revising their memos, redacting parts of their transcripts, and adding new thematic ideas to the nascent integrated analyses and frames I was engaging in at that phase.

Following this phase, I used the newest codes to analyze TSC's scripts. I then returned to the scripts to link them to the intersection of codes and my conceptual framework. I then connected scenes and monologues to other data with similar codes and conceptual ideas. This was an important part of the process in engaging in a critical analysis of script themes. It was also the first time I started to integrate the different types of data across thematic frames.

Next, I grouped codes into larger themes to begin outlining chapters. I rearranged these themes several times and manipulated the structure. From there, I created the first draft of what would be considered a traditional findings chapter. I created several drafts

of chapters until I felt comfortable sending them to ensemble members to review. I opted to follow different structures several times, incorporating findings, analysis, and discussion in each chapter, scaffolding the themes and concepts into a final chapter that laid out an analytical framework for TSC.

Chapter V

“EDUCATION IS LIBERATION”: HIGHER EDUCATION AND A COMMUNITY FOR HEALING AND EMPOWERMENT

Introduction: TSC’s Life Journeys, Foundational Values, and Commitments

A TSC (Theater for Social Change) performance enacts the processes and journeys that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women have undertaken to develop their identities, agency, and leadership. Ensemble members’ involvement with College and Community Fellowship (CCF) and higher education nurtured many of these qualities and skills, influencing how they shaped the values and practices within their TSC community. This chapter focuses on how and why education during and after prison and involvement in CCF and TSC are opportunities and spaces for developing critical consciousness, academic, and literacy skills; role modeling; and participation in a supportive community that engenders an understanding for ensemble members of how their past life trajectories were intertwined with their social, economic, and political context as well as their justice involvement. This development of capabilities, particularly through higher education and participation in CCF, helped the members heal from the traumas of institutional and structural violence and their justice system involvement. They were able to internalize hope, realize their potential, and discover theater as a creative outlet and space for mutual support, further healing, and growth. These

experiences influenced the development of TSC's ethos, advocacy mission, and processes upon CCF's launching of the nascent theater group, with the advocacy and public education components strengthening as time went on.

**The Conscientization Process: Critically Engaging in Personal Stories
and Making the Social Context Visible**

"[M]y involvement with CCF started with my involvement with the college program inside prison," explained one ensemble member, Cheryl, linking her educational experiences in the College Bound program at Bedford Hills to her participation in CCF and TSC after she came home. Advocating for educational access for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people is part of TSC's core identity, and a part of this advocacy and organizing impulse can be traced back to efforts to bring college back to Bedford Hills, as referenced in the following TSC monologue:

CHERYL: People who know me may think that my *first experience with advocacy while incarcerated happened with my involvement in bringing college back to prison* [emphasis added] through private funding (of course, because they got rid of Pell Grants). But that wasn't it. It was advocating for an extra roll of toilet paper. You see, the monthly distribution of toilet paper was not gender responsive; the women received the same amount of toilet paper as the men, four lousy rolls. It must have been a man who came up with that rule, because that's IMPOSSIBLE!!!

In addition to calling attention to gender issues inside prison that would be invisible to women who have never been incarcerated, this humorous monologue referenced Cheryl's advocacy work at Bedford Hills. When Cheryl arrived to serve her sentence at Bedford Hills, a group of incarcerated women were in the process of transforming the devastation caused by the demise of the college prison program into action and hope (Law, 2017). President Clinton had recently signed the 1994 Violent

Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which forbade federally funded Pell Grants from being used by incarcerated people to pay for college prison programs. The Bedford Hills college program was one of 342 programs to close that year in New York State correctional facilities as a consequence of the Act. In response, the educational advocates at Bedford Hills organized with higher education leaders and community volunteers on the outside to reinstate the college prison program. Cheryl became actively involved in this group.

The story of this advocacy effort to bring college back to prison and the impacts of the newly formed College Bound program were documented in the 2001 participatory action research (PAR) report, *Changing Minds*, discussed at length earlier in Chapter II. This report documented the positive impacts that the revived higher education program had on the students who participated, which, in turn, improved the prison environment and lowered rates of recidivism. Importantly, women who participated in the higher education program reported that their outlook changed significantly. For example, they felt hopeful about their futures, gained a desire to continue their self-development after leaving prison, and developed a sense of care and drive to give back to their families, communities, and society. They also reported that their own educational pursuits inspired their children to aspire to succeed in school.

Cheryl joined the team of PAR researchers and co-authored the *Changing Minds* report, another experience that was life-changing for her:

When I was interviewing women about the impact that college had on them, um, they may have been coming as far as Rochester, but their stories sounded like my story, coming from the South Bronx. You know, and so they looked like me. It was all women of color. You know, we were all deprived of certain things in school. And, um, and so it was pretty amazing for me, and a light bulb went off in my head.

Cheryl's interviewing low-income women of color who grew up in different communities around New York State, but who had had similar experiences to hers, set off a "light bulb" in her head. It revealed for her the previously invisible conditions and structural inequalities that brought these women into contact with the justice system. This light bulb moment, grounded in the life stories of women like herself, helped galvanize Cheryl's critical consciousness development. Much like Eddie Ellis and his colleagues' Seven Neighborhood Study, Cheryl's engagement in research within prison walls gave her access to stories of women and their life journeys to which few people outside of prison had access.

Cheryl's personal transformation was also tied to her education: "[F]or us, it was through the books and the educational piece that brought us to [the] realization that, no, this is not right." She started her journey of self-awareness and societal analysis in her sociology classes, where she developed a deeply critical analysis of what she identified as "not right" about the neighborhood in which she grew up: the poor-quality public education system in which she went to school and the poverty conditions within which her single mother struggled to raise a family. Cheryl recalled that she was unaware when she was a child that the conditions of her South Bronx neighborhood were not ubiquitous. During her sociology and participatory research methods college courses at Bedford, she started to engage with and understand how her childhood environment affected her. Until then, Cheryl noted, those conditions were all she knew. She had nothing to compare them to, no other frame of reference.

We didn't know we were poor 'cause everybody was poor. [LAUGH]
 You know what I'm saying? Nobody had nothing.... My mom was on social service(s)...but so was my neighbor [next door] and so was the neighbor downstairs and so was the neighbor across the street.

Sociological theory provided Cheryl with a reference point and analytical lens through which to make sense of her life and neighborhood:

[I better understand] *why* [emphasis added] I didn't graduate from school.... I had a crappy school...I had thirty people in my class, thirty students. I had crummy books.... I lived in a project [with] gunshots you could hear at night. I mean it's just it's hard to grow up that way and not come out of it unscathed....

The study of sociology during her incarceration awakened her to the connections between her neighborhood conditions; the structures and systems that negatively impacted her life and feelings of self-worth; and how these led her to make decisions, get into situations, and react in ways that were against her own best interests. Cheryl's application of sociological theory to her life history is what C. Wright Mills (1959) described as the "sociological imagination," one's ability to grasp "history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (p. 6).

Cheryl took up the charge to employ sociological theory and her sociological imagination for healing and liberation: "I feel like my—my prison experience was by a higher power because it gave me the ability to understand...where I came from and where others like me came from and to understand how to relate this and to talk about it to others so that *we can make change*." Her transformation included two key steps: first, becoming critically engaged in self and society; and second, developing a sense of agency directed towards giving back to her community and changing the conditions of that community. She was inspired to study policy when she came home, pursuing a master's degree in public policy:

I wanted to affect a community...I wanted to learn more about the policies that affected my community 'cause I could then make change.... [W]hat made me go in that direction was...the participatory action research project when I was asking questions that mirrored me....

With education that fosters critical thinking comes an aspiration to change disparities and circumstances. Knowledge generation, whether through experiential learning or formal education, enables theorizing for self-recovery, collective liberation, and imagination for possible futures, per hooks (1991), and critical consciousness development, per Freire (1970), for healing, empowerment, and liberation. Cheryl's conscientization led her to pursue a master's degree in policy after she came home; other ensemble members had similar experiences of engaging in the process of conscientization, with their personal experiences leading up to and during prison as being instrumental in helping them form their praxis, i.e., to engage in changing their community for the better. The analytical skills they developed represent the capabilities that Nixon et al. (2008) argued are fundamental for formerly incarcerated people to be able to be effective leaders, practice community self-determination, and engage in civic dialogue and change.

Fellow ensemble member Sharon first met Cheryl when they were both incarcerated at Bedford Hills. She also enrolled in a sociology class as part of the College Bound program. Like Cheryl, Sharon sees her prison experience as life-changing, as part of a journey that was guided by spiritual forces. She does not regret traveling on what she called a "rough, rugged, horrid road" that she believed she "had to go through...for me to be able to help people." She looked back: "If I didn't go to prison, I wouldn't know Cheryl, I wouldn't know Barbara [the founded of CCF], I wouldn't know [the women of TSC]." Her journey to prison included the trauma of losing her fiancé in a car accident before their wedding. She then married a man who beat her but was never brought to justice for abusing her:

Back then they didn't talk about it, you know? It wasn't spoken about. My mother, God bless her heart, she was like, is he beating on you? And I was like, no. And so you hid it, you know? When you had the black eyes or whatever you didn't go home to mom, to dad, you went to the hospital. With him standing there and the doctor [asked me], did he do this? And it's like, really? You're gonna ask me in front of him? Am I going to sit and say yes? And so you just didn't say anything. It was so bad where I wanted a divorce. This was almost like two years, like a year and a half. He tried to take me in a dark alley and kill me. Um, so I literally had to go underground....

Sharon's life changed irrevocably when on her way home one night, a stranger attempted to rape her. She fought back and killed her attacker: "I fought for my life.... It's unfortunate that he had to lose his.... I wish it didn't go that way." Although in New York State a person can receive a justifiable homicide sentence if she can show sufficient evidence that her life was in danger and she acted in self-defense, Sharon did not receive that sentence. She reflected, "There [are] not many African American or people of color [who] receive a justifiable homicide sentence." She was sentenced to 9 to 18 years in prison.

Sharon came from a middle-class family who valued education. She found that her familial context contrasted greatly with most of the women she met while in prison:

Once I got to prison, I was exposed to something completely different.... I didn't know about the effects of homelessness, or people being hungry.... I didn't know what that was, or being raised by a single parent, or not being able to, you know, get new clothes 'cause you had to wear hand-me-downs.... So there was just some aspects of like, you know, that I was not knowledgeable about. And it took me going to prison to learn that. And it kind of brought it home for me. I knew the minute that I got in prison and I started hearing the women's stories, just listening I knew within myself that that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a counselor. That's what started it.

The kind of analysis in which Sharon engaged, looking back at her past, led her to formulate a theoretical understanding of the social context in which she lived. When she was experiencing domestic abuse, it was at a time when there were few safe places to

disclose her situation. She was also victim of the racism embedded in the criminal justice system that made it virtually impossible for her to be seen as the victim who was attacked by a man in the middle of the night and whom she killed out of self-defense. She was also deeply impacted by the low-income women of color with whom she came into contact during her incarceration. This resulted in her eventual decision to pursue a profession in counseling as a way to take action to help women steer themselves from the systems that punished them. Once she became a social worker, one of her jobs was as a director of a homeless shelter for women, many of whom were escaping violence. She drew from both personal and professional experience in this work.

Another ensemble member, Sister X, engaged in an experiential learning process during her incarceration that led her to formulate an understanding of the relationship between prison and educational failure—critical analyses which she would continue to engage in after coming home. When Sister X arrived at Albion Correctional Facility, she signed up for GED classes, even though she already had a GED and had attended some college before prison. This was after college had been removed from almost all New York State prisons, so she could no longer enroll in college while she finished her sentence. Sister X was desperate for something to stimulate her. The GED instructor asked her to help out as a tutor, which was an eye-opening experience: “I realized how so many people were in prison that really don’t even have a basic education.” It was at that time that she started to form a critical view of the education and criminal justice systems:

At first I thought it was just me. But then I started being conscious of the fact that, I think, this is systematic. There were some White women in prison, but very few. The majority were Black or Hispanic. And they all had similar journeys as I did.... Why is it that so many people are being held...and have no education? Then I always take it back to myself.... Maybe [they] tried to pursue an education, maybe they got diverted just like I did.

Sister X reflected on her diversion from education. It began when she left high school because she became pregnant as a teen. She returned to school to earn her GED and enroll in college. She excelled in her BA program, receiving A's in all her classes, but she was a low-income single mother and needed to apply for social services to make ends meet. She felt that she was eventually punished for her economic situation:

I had this dream of...becoming a lawyer.... I was a single mom and I was young.... I was living in a little studio apartment with me and my son and the welfare was paying the rent and I was getting food stamps—that was my life line.... I don't even know how they found out, but [welfare sat] me down and they was like, we found out that you're in a four-year college and that's absolutely against the rules.... Well I was devastated because I loved going to school.

Her conclusion was stark: “This whole welfare system is not designed for me to succeed.”

That was not the last time a system would fail Sister X. Without a college degree, she was relegated to low-wage jobs and struggled to make ends meet. She engaged in drug dealing to survive, and then was arrested for using drugs. She asked the judge who sentenced her to send her to a drug treatment program. Instead, he sent her to a prison with no option to attend college. When she finally had the chance to pursue her BA upon coming home and becoming part of CCF, she continued analyzing her life trajectory and the punitive policies and systems that led to her incarceration. She saw connections between those systems in which she and the other women at Albion were enmeshed: welfare, education, segregated neighborhoods, and the justice system, including sentencing policies and lack of correctional rehabilitative services:

I think what made me really go back to this was, years later I had come home from prison, and I went to college.... [G]oing back to school and digging...they have you write all these essays about your life...why are you here, and so that's what made me [go] back to where it all started.

Sister X also channeled her calling to help her community by becoming a social services professional. As Sharon had, Sister X eventually received an MSW as well as two other related master's degrees. She formulated her policy solutions to mass incarceration based on her own personal experiences, as well as the situations of the women she met in prison, and what she learned working in a homeless shelter where many of the residents were formerly incarcerated.

Davis (2003) pointed out that for a long time there has been a devastating lack of societal reflection about the realities of the communities that are disproportionately feeding the prison system—that is, unless one has been incarcerated, at which point the prison experience makes these realities glaring. Davis implicated all people who made abstract and distanced themselves from the prison system, “relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers” rather than “seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism” (p. 16). This structural violence, or systems and institutions that curtail the life chances of low-income people of color, must be made visible in order to address them at their root. Formerly incarcerated people such as Davis, CCF fellows, and TSC ensemble members focused their work on making the invisibility of mass incarceration's devastating effects visible to communities that have not been impacted by mass incarceration.

Well before the public attitude towards the punitive criminal justice system changed, women such as Cheryl, Sharon, and Sister X were bearing witness not only to their prison experiences situated within the context of their lives, but to the lived

experiences of the women with whom they were incarcerated. Their knowledge was based on personal experiences, or *ground truths*, per Sturm and Tae (2017). The activation of their consciousness was based on looking back at their life stories and those of the women with whom they were incarcerated, driving their commitment to engage in changing their communities, institutions, and policies. They brought this commitment with them to CCF and TSC, strengthening their resolve to engage in careers and advocacy to help individuals and/or communities build their own capacities to make personal and social change. This was also true of most other ensemble members who brought to TSC their own personal experiences navigating incarceration and reentry; critical consciousness development; edification; and their drive to influence their families, communities, and society.

The Promise of Higher Education in Prison

Barbara Martinsons, a sociology professor at Marymount Manhattan College, began teaching at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for the Women's College Bound program shortly after it started. She then founded CCF after she stopped teaching at Bedford Hills. In 2016, at CCF's 15th Anniversary gala event honoring Barbara, TSC narrated the tale of how she came to teach at the Bedford Hills' College Bound program.

CHERYL: Barbara saw a flier on the Marymount College bulletin board that said, "Are you interested in teaching in a women's prison?"

She walked away, came back, walked away, thought about it again, and said, "It wasn't on my bucket list, but what the hell? It's near my house. Why not?"

Once she became our professor at Bedford Hills, we didn't know what we were in for. Barbara had a knack for correcting our papers in red pen. We used [to] laugh at each other about who got the

most red on their paper, but that taught us to be better writers today.

Although only two members of the current ensemble, Cheryl and Sharon, had Barbara as a professor at Bedford, the scene refers to her as *our professor*, a telling choice of words. During her interview, Sharon spoke of a deep appreciation for Barbara because she was a tough professor who pushed her students to learn and to grow intellectually, treating them the same as if they had been in a college environment paying for the class and not in a prison. She noted that Barbara, as well as the other College Bound professors, believed in her students' abilities and showed a genuine interest in them: "[Barbara] was interested...in our learning, in the educating, and the edifying." Sharon attested that she came home a much better writer, also referencing Barbara's reputation for mercilessly marking up students' papers with her red pen, and believed that she "didn't have a watered-down education in spite of what other people in society might have thought.... I came away knowing that I am worthy of receiving an education...in spite of this spot on my record...."

Education places a person in the category of people who are valued by society. It helps to disperse the black cloud of incarceration and being labeled a criminal. For Sharon, going to class was a way to reintegrate and to feel human, worthwhile, and whole. It created for her a new, positive identity. The commitment of Sharon's professors to her learning, growth, and education played a significant role in lifting her clouds of despair.

Some TSC members spoke emotionally about the loss of college in prison following the passage of the 1994 crime bill. These ensemble members believed that they would have benefited tremendously from higher education during their incarceration.

Linda Faye reflected during her interview, “[I]f they would’ve had [college when I was incarcerated], I would’ve already had my doctorate. I would’ve did it because it would’ve given me some insight. I didn’t have that opportunity, so I started my stuff when I was home....” “Starting my stuff” refers to her processing of the homophobia that she experienced in her family, her recovery from addiction, her healing, and her career development. Importantly, she viewed education as a means of building self-awareness and critical insights rather than a pathway to gainful employment, which is what education also enabled her to achieve; she would go on to earn her MSW, become a licensed social worker, and become a regional director—and the sole African American person in a senior staff position at her agency—of a residential program services at a large mental health nonprofit organization.

Vivian also felt that lack of access to higher education in prison kept her from participating in personal and educational development during her 7 years in prison. She spoke of her feelings of hopelessness when she was unable to pursue college while incarcerated during an episode of *On the Count: The Prison and Criminal Justice Report*, the WBAI radio show previously executive-produced by Eddie Ellis. On this show, Vivian was a guest host and invited TSC’s then-Artistic Director, Beth Mirarchi, to speak about TSC’s arts advocacy, along with three ensemble members to perform their monologues, in order to focus the theme of the show on advocacy to expand higher education in and after prison. During the program, Vivian spoke of the devastation she felt when she was transferred from Bedford Hills to a prison without college:

I was sent to Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, which still had a college program. I will never forget the glimmer of hope that I felt after feeling hopeless in the county jail for a year while I was fighting my case.... I’m not going to waste away for the next seven years, I’m going to go to college. I was going to

major in sociology, and I was feeling hopeful for the first time in a whole year...and two days later I got this notice that they were going to transfer me to Albion Correctional Facility, where there is no college program. And I tried to fight with the administration, saying, look I have my high school diploma already. If I go to Albion there's nothing to do. I want to stay here where there's college. You know, they don't care what you want when you're a prisoner. You go where they tell you. So I was transferred to Albion and I didn't have the opportunity to go to college. That's one of the reasons I'm so passionate about this issue. I really have spent my life since then, working with other women who wanted to advance their education.

Vivian spoke about the connection between higher education and hope, a recurring theme in TSC's material. Prison is a hopeless place for many incarcerated people. For the Bedford Hills community of incarcerated women, hope was restored with the rebirth of the college program. The *Changing Minds* report that Cheryl participated in researching and writing posited how education and hope are linked:

College offers an opportunity for women in prison to think, grow, reflect on the past and reimagine responsible futures. College signals a process of personal development and transforms the devastation of prison into an opportunity to turn one's life around. (Fine et al., 2001, p. 23)

This narrative of turning one's life around through education is present in all TSC ensemble members' biographies. All spoke of their post-incarceration education and involvement in CCF as transformative. One ensemble member, Sweetness, started college after she came home. Even now, she became emotional when she thought of how this made her feel; as she put it, succeeding in her education was "liberating" because it freed her from fear: "I didn't do well in school as a child. I was afraid of everything. I wasn't breathing." Her fears led her decision making to be directed and influenced by others; she did not feel free to make her own life choices, including a marriage and career that were not of her own volition. She took firm control of the direction of her life after

this self-reflective period and now felt “conscious and free” to make choices based on her own needs and desires.

Denise joined CCF when she entered a combined GED and college program. She credited her access to education through CCF as transformative: “Education is everything. It opened doors.” Education helped her develop different perspectives and enabled her to get a full-time job and build a career; before she received her college degree, she had only part-time jobs or did not work at all. She explained that she had dropped out of high school when she was young, and she choked up with emotion while thinking about her childhood experience with school. She had to take a breath before continuing: “I was getting ready to cry,” she whispered. And then she went on:

Growing up, I was, like, the oldest girl.... I had, what, three brothers older than me and then I was the oldest girl. So a lot of responsibility fell on me for being the oldest girl.... So I never had nobody to sit down and basically help me with my homework, or help me understand things that I [didn’t] understand....

Despite not having educational support when she was growing up, Denise developed the courage to go back to school over three decades after she left high school without a diploma. She often delivered the tremendously memorable line at the end of a TSC performance: “It’s walking into a classroom again for the first time in thirty-three years. It’s staying in school the second time around with support from my peers.”

The ensemble members’ personal experiences of transformative education motivated them to share the message of their life-changing and life-affirming experiences, as expressed ardently in a TSC scene: “I say; you don’t see the scars of my incarceration; because of education; YOU SEE LIBERATION!” The concept of “education as liberation” was defined in multiple ways by TSC members. All ensemble members’ lives changed dramatically once they received their degrees (almost all TSC

members went on to receive master's degrees) and embarked on careers that would not have been possible without higher education. Barbara, Vivian, and Cheryl all affirmed that education for the purpose of sustainable employment was one of the most worthwhile goals of CCF. However, they also couched education and employment as an issue of equity and justice, linking education and employment opportunities to the under-resourced and segregated schools and neighborhoods to which low-income people of color have systemically been relegated.

This framework is one that is critical of institutions and systems at the root of oppressing and marginalizing low-income people of color. Higher education has been praised by researchers, justice system reform-minded policymakers, and funders as an anti-recidivism strategy, which is important from a public safety standpoint but does not often connect to the larger issues of equity and systemic oppression. Even though most TSC members had to wait to start college until they came home, it is clear that education holds tremendous importance in their lives as a way to instill hope; this is a large part of what motivates them to take their personal stories to a public audience.

TSC's Humble Beginnings at CCF

After she stopped teaching sociology as part of Bedford Hill's College Bound program, Barbara Martinsons founded College and Community Fellowship (CCF) in 2001 as a direct response to seeing women struggle to finish their degrees once they came home from prison. CCF's early programs, one of which was TSC when it was known simply as "the theater group," grew organically, responding in direct time to the needs and ideas of CCF fellows. Peer mentoring and tutoring are examples of supports that

women identified as necessary for them to succeed in higher education. Many women were first-generation college students and did not know how to navigate higher education, so peer mentors and tutors served as resources and navigators.

One ensemble member, Tataria, joined CCF shortly after its founding. She took the initiative to organize a support group for CCF fellows to discuss issues in their personal lives, such as dealing with caring for children and parents. The impetus for forming the support group came from her own personal experiences of non-academic challenges getting in the way of her education, challenges which she successfully overcame to then go on to earn her MSW. CCF gave women the space to identify their needs as well as the infrastructure and supports to create their own programs to address those needs. This ethos that formerly incarcerated women are the experts in their own needs and are equipped with the skills and leadership to engage in developing their own solutions and programs makes its way into TSC's process and material.

Barbara came up with the idea of a theater group as an outgrowth of a CCF writing group. She organized a writing retreat for the group at a Girl Scout camp in Westchester, where Barbara and other volunteers participated equally with the fellows in prose and poetry writing exercises, movement activities, and reading poems and pieces aloud—creative elements that could be incorporated into performance. Barbara recalled that these early retreat formats were “extemporaneous” and built on a sense of trust. “So that...contributed to our sense of togetherness, be a community together.” Barbara then started the theater group by holding writing sessions at her home every other Saturday, with the same enthusiasm and “inventing ourselves as we went along” spirit that she tapped into in order to form CCF and the early writing retreats. All of the CCF fellows

who gathered for the theater group on Saturdays worked full-time and had many other responsibilities, including family and school, but, despite their busy lives, they were dedicated to the gatherings.

The TSC members who were part of the theater group during those early days remembered that Barbara came up with a technique to prompt the group to write about what they were experiencing and feeling. She provided index cards in the form of pictures or headlines from newspaper articles that had “some kind of significance, some kind of political statement,” as Sister X explained. Everyone, including Barbara, and, later on, co-facilitators and interns, wrote their responses to the prompts and then read aloud what they had written. Sharon described those sessions as “freestyle”:

Whatever you wanted to write about we wrote, you know? Most times we’d talk about all of these different things. How do you feel about that? We wrote about it. We’d talk about a current event, you know? [S]ome people are angry, some people are not. [Whatever] the feelings you felt...let’s write it.

Tami had similar memories: “We would take off [from the prompt] and everybody would come up with something different that had like probably been bottled up in them.” Sister X remembered that “we would...relate the pictures to...our whole incarceration experience.” Sharon also remembered those early days: “We wrote. We wrote. We wrote. We wrote a lot, you know? I think at this time...it was more therapeutic [for us] than it was for anyone’s...outside benefits....”

The group writing strategy that Sharon called “freestyle” is also called freewriting by literacy experts. In a 2008 article entitled “Women in Transition from Prison: Class, Race, and Collaborative Literacy,” Barbara and Limor Pinhasi-Vittorio, one of TSC’s co-facilitators who is also a literacy professor, co-wrote a reflective practice piece about the process during that early time in TSC’s lifespan, for which the freewriting aspect of

the sessions was a deliberate choice. In the article, they explained the power of freewriting to build trust among the group members, who consisted of TSC members, the co-facilitators, and interns. Freewriting consisted of:

focus[ing] the initial act of writing when thoughts flow without inhibition, rather than on correcting, judging, or editing. As an impetus to our writing we review poems, paintings, stories, photographs, or pieces of music and then respond to them in an unmediated “whatever comes to one’s head” way of getting our responses down on paper. This work is undertaken right there; no one decides to finish her work later, or to take it home and polish it. Both the form—works take the shape of poetry, prose, dialogue and songs—and the content are immediate and often emotionally intense. (p. 33)

The memories that ensemble members who participated at that time had of these sessions showed that freewriting was very effective in bringing about emotional responses. Furthermore, literacy theorists linked the ability to “feel and express emotion” to the process of improving one’s writing skills and to cultivate thoughts. Barbara and Limor reflected on the importance of sharing the writing with the group. It creates a vulnerability, cultivates risk taking, and builds trust. They explained:

When we are equally ready to take risks and bare emotions.... We each unravel a part of ourselves in front of the group and as a result allow ourselves to be seen more profoundly than in usual or academic interactions. (pp. 33-34)

After making the transition from CCF student to Executive Director, Vivian noticed that nurturing students’ confidence in their writing was a useful strategy for increasing their academic performance. Although she spoke of the writing group, in which some TSC members were also involved, her observation applied to the success of TSC’s freewriting:

I saw a very deep connection between people’s confidence and their ability to write academically...[with] the freedom they had in writing in the creative writing group; that that was a really safe space to write however they wanted to write, whatever they wanted to write, and that kind of eased some of the anxiety that a lot of our students have around writing academically.

Vivian noticed that the forum to write without constraints became a means to develop the confidence in one's written and academic writing skills, i.e., the development of an *academic voice*. This was confirmed by other TSC members' experiences. This is an incredibly important strategy for an organization supporting women to succeed in higher education. Research has shown that people who are incarcerated have, on average, lower educational attainment than the general population (Davis et al., 2013, p. xv). Past academic failures created doubt in formerly incarcerated students' minds. They associated education with negative experiences and emotions. Freewriting—the act of writing free from critique and correction—is an effective strategy for shifting negative associations of writing that grew out of experiences in formal education settings that were damaging to their sense of self-worth, to positive experiences of writing for self-discovery in less high-stakes settings.

Later retreats brought the writing and theater group members together. Cheryl noted that there was a trust between Barbara and the fellows that enabled them to write and read their work freely in a safe space. Ensemble member Sweetness recalled one of the retreats vividly:

The theater group...went on this writing retreat.... For me, the heavens opened up—really it did—‘cause we had to do some exercises that just really went right inside. (snaps) I went there wanting to cry and had the opportunity, oh God, to cry...at the retreat.

When I asked what enabled her to get to the point that let her pain surface, Cheryl described the setting, explaining that “atmosphere is so important.” The organizer asked the participants to come to the writing exercise in their pajamas, “like at a sleepover.” Then everyone was given a series of prompts. One of the prompts was to connect the prompt to something that was “dear to us”:

My brother, who I was very, very, very close to, had passed away.... I don't think I had, um, mourned his loss in a crying type of way..... Maybe I was holding on to something and um, and so the exercise allowed it to be released, so the cry came out....

Other prompts also led Cheryl to delve into her childhood: What did you want to be when you were a little girl? What was your favorite item of clothing? The prompts became ways for her to look back at her life from a critical gaze.

Similarly, Linda Faye was facing a difficult time in her life. After many years of being in recovery, Linda Faye went through the process of exploring her painful childhood experiences and feelings of low self-esteem after coming out as a lesbian and being rejected by her mother. After years in a tumultuous relationship, she and her mother had a tender reconciliation. Linda Faye began attending church with her mother and continued to strengthen their relationship, so when her mother became seriously ill, she was distraught: "I just had my mother again in my life." It was her first time watching someone she cared for so deeply succumbing to illness. She was not sure how she would cope and worried that the stress would cause her to relapse.

At the retreat, Linda Faye wrote and read her writing aloud, and through those actions of writing and sharing what she was going through, she learned that she was not alone: "People began to be there for me and help and support me and what I was going through in my head.... I didn't think anybody else could suffer like I could." She learned that other TSC members were going through comparable situations with their mothers and other loved ones. As time went on and they continued their work as an ensemble, Linda Faye knew she could support other TSC members when their mothers got sick or passed away because she experienced something similar that activated her empathy and compassion. This type of healing took place in the safe spaces created during writing

sessions. Later on, when the theater group coalesced into TSC, she wrote a monologue called “Motherflowers” about her relationship with her mother. It was easier to write about her painful experience after she had already started the healing process within the group.

The opportunities to hone the craft and skill of written self-expression built up ensemble members’ confidence. An ensemble member recalled:

I wrote a lot when I was incarcerated because that was my way of communicating with my family because I was far, far away that I didn’t really get visits...but I didn’t really think I was saying anything.... So when I started with the Theater for Social Change and I started writing, just writing from inside, and, then, after I read it out loud, people was like, oh, that’s cool, that’s nice. The other people was enjoying it and so I just kept writing....

Tami, who struggled with her grammar throughout college, attended the writing group and relished the opportunity to practice her writing. When Barbara took the group on a retreat upstate, it was there that she told Tami she had the ability to write. “I was like, what is this lady talking about?” Barbara then told her that she could write theater.

I’m like, theater? Me? I would never stand in front of nobody if I didn’t have to. But I think that was the point—she believed in you. [T]hen when we did the group, it just took off. That’s how I got involved.

This underscored Vivian’s observation about the importance of developing confidence in one’s writing, and added the dimension that others believing in one’s abilities bolsters that confidence. When Barbara showed that she believed in Tami’s abilities so much so that Barbara invited her to join the theater group, Tami’s confidence blossomed.

Ensemble members cherished the retreat time because it took them out of their daily routine and created a space for reflection. This is another important aspect of CCF’s support of formerly incarcerated women. These groups are examples of spaces that allow

women who are in reentry to take time out of their daily routines and responsibilities to focus on themselves and their needs. In the case of the writing and theater groups, women were able to focus on healing through writing and sharing their range of emotions and traumas; developing writing skills and confidence in their academic and writing abilities; and forming lasting bonds with each other.

Vivian had multiple vantage points on TSC, having been a CCF student, a long-term TSC member, and CCF's Executive Director:

I think that the theater group wouldn't exist without the writing group because most of the people in the theater group didn't aspire to be theatrical performers. [T]hey do want to have a voice and they do think they have something to say. I can't imagine that if we were doing you know like many people do, Shakespeare in Prison, or you know other people's work and memorizing it and performing it, I don't think that two-thirds of the group would be interested at all, maybe even more than two-thirds.

Vivian's point—that ensemble members have a voice and want to employ theater because they “have something to say”—is one of the drivers of CCF's development. The ensemble members concurred with Vivian, speaking about theater as an invaluable tool for developing their voices, inspiring others to find their voices, contributing their voices to the movement to end mass incarceration, or being the voice for other women who could not (yet) speak for themselves. This is a significant point, because it demonstrates that the root or precursor of current-day TSC was a desire to develop and amplify one's voice rather than to develop theater arts skills per se. Once ensemble members developed the confidence to take their writing to an audience, they began to amplify their voices, individually and collectively.

Finally, another early programming idea served as cross-fertilization for TSC's values and commitments. As the theater and writing groups were starting up, two reading

groups called the Conviction Seminar and the CLEAR (Community, Leadership and Education After Reentry) reading group also formed. These groups were short-lived but shaped the evolution of CCF and TSC. Vivian explained, “It was a group of people who were reading...about conviction and incarceration from multiple perspectives and learning about public policy and connections and the structural issues in the criminal justice system.” The groups read theorists such as Foucault and Wacquant who addressed the systems of punishment, control, and racism. Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and the 1992 Black women’s studies anthology *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* were addressing the perspectives of women of color, with Crenshaw particularly focusing on how this plays out in the legal system, coining the term and disseminating the concept of *intersectionality*.

Intersectionality is a discrimination framework for the legal and social implications of the interconnecting gender and racial facets of Black women’s lived experiences that resulted in their uniquely experienced ways of interacting and intersecting with the legal and policy system.

With Vivian as the lead author and another TSC ensemble member as a co-author, the CLEAR reading group published an article in 2008 called “Life Capacity Beyond Reentry: A Critical Examination of Racism and Prisoner Reentry Reform in the U.S.,” discussed in the theoretical framework in Chapter III, that comes across simultaneously as manifesto, strategy, and theoretical guidepost to orient a movement and vision to dismantle the structurally racist criminal justice system. The CLEAR article positioned formerly incarcerated leaders at the center of this movement to undo the racist and

oppressive structures that enabled the policies creating the largest prison system the world has ever known by defining justice from a critical lens.

This manifesto made three central tenets clear: (a) in order to have true justice, the racist and oppressive structures embedded in our society that have channeled people into the prison system in the first place must be addressed and eradicated as part of “reentry”; (b) power must be redistributed to those most impacted by mass incarceration; and (c) this redistribution of power should enable formerly incarcerated people access to opportunities that develop their capacities to lead this charge to develop a new vision of society. Importantly, CCF and TSC reflect these values: they are spaces that deliberately nurture the capacity of formerly incarcerated women through education and cultivation of self-expression in order to be self-advocates and community leaders.

Vivian credit/ed the reading groups with having a significant impact on her own political development. She talked about that development as more than intellectual; it impacted all realms of her life, including her spiritual identity. She put her theory into practice, living out her values, morals, and beliefs:

It was almost [palpable] the way my political self changed during that process.... I developed [a] sense of how environments and communities, and structures impact people’s individual lives.... I embodied it in my practice and how I lived my life. And, during that time when I was reading those things it—I understood who I really was spiritually and intellectually, and I began to be that in my activities and in my body.

As I discussed in Chapter III, other theorists and movement builders such as Eddie Ellis’ Center for NuLeadership’s approach to criminal justice system reform and Davis and Bhavnani’s theorizing of alternatives to prison based on incarcerated women’s experiences shared CLEAR’s ethos and strategy. They may offer different approaches,

but their underlying values serve their goals for authentic restorative justice that redistributes power, resources, and capacity development.

Finally, the CLEAR article called for access to opportunities for formerly incarcerated people to live their lives to their fullest potential, on their own terms. For all ensemble members, CCF provided a life-altering opportunity for personal and community transformation through education, self-reflection, critical analyses, and written expression. Employing the tools, ethos, support, and capabilities fostered through involvement in CCF, the ensemble coalesced its identity as a group of powerful formerly incarcerated women with the explicit goal of educating their audiences about the collateral consequences of mass incarceration in order to change policies.

The Maturation of TSC: Blossoming Into a Full-Fledged Performance Group

TSC has evolved over the years both in its content development and in where and how often it performs. The first TSC performance took place at an auction of Barbara's family's artwork to raise money for CCF. The other main venues for early TSC performances were at CCF graduations, where family members, friends, allies, and other CCF fellows celebrated and honored the women who had graduated that year. The theater group assembled on a small platform or stage, depending on the venue, and read aloud from scripts in binders. Even with their lack of theatrical techniques and their amateur presentation, they still made an impact on their audiences.

Linda Faye saw TSC perform at a graduation before she joined the group and was captivated. She was asked to help with the lighting at the performance and was glad to be a part of what she thought was a very "powerful" group performance:

[TSC] talked about “us”—our community of people who were formerly incarcerated—in positive ways in front of people other than just us. That was my first understanding...where I realized the first time was that it was not just people who were formerly incarcerated sitting in that audience, and they were clapping [Linda Faye slowly claps three times]. And I was like, “Ohhhh, that’s cool.” That was cool for me because it let me know that we can get to others. We can convey to others the gifts we have, the gifts that are similar to their own gifts.... People would come up. There was a woman, I don’t know who she was, but she came up and she spoke about how we were role models. I wasn’t graduating but she was talking about “us”....

This interview foreshadows the next chapters on TSC’s goals and audience impact, showing that even early in its history, the group touched the hearts of formerly incarcerated women and spoke to their experiences. It showed Linda Faye that formerly incarcerated women could transform the narratives of the stigma of incarceration through telling their stories of overcoming obstacles and living out their lives fully. Seeing the audience respond to the performance so positively made a significant impact on her. She also identified with the performers, calling the theater group members “role models.” TSC as part of a community that the audience recognized as having gifts meant that the group had the ability to spread the message to others that Linda Faye’s community had value and worth.

Vivian noticed that TSC’s material was evolving over time. As discussed earlier, Vivian had participated in TSC and the writing and reading groups as a CCF fellow. She had to take a hiatus from participating in TSC while she was adjusting to her new position as CCF’s Executive Director. While on leave from TSC, Vivian saw that the ensemble had decided to focus that year’s graduation performance on the theme of “access to education and how important it is to us...[and] it read as more of an advertisement for CCF.” When she returned to TSC the following year, she advised the

group “that they weren’t an advertisement for CCF...they were an advertisement for a set of values and principles around social justice.... And over time that happened.”

Barbara continued as co-facilitator during Vivian’s hiatus and transitioned out of this role completely when a young applied theater student named Beth Mirarchi assumed the role, bringing with her theater techniques and a new level of professionalism. Beth was a White woman who had no direct experience with the justice system but did have training and experience in theater acting and directing. What brought Beth to TSC was a spring 2008 class assignment that asked the class to create and implement a theater workshop with a community group. She and two other graduate students from New York University’s applied theater program learned about TSC and had reached out to Barbara about their interest in working with the theater group. As it turned out, the timing was right to bring theater students on board because, as Vivian told the students, TSC was looking to heighten its theatrical artistry:

[Vivian told us that they were] interested in making the performance more theatrical, more professional.... She talked about how they had been reading from scripts at their performances, they really didn’t have staging, and they hadn’t gotten to work with a lot of different directors and different artists.... [We] talked with her about things we could do with the group, ways we could generate scenes with performance exercises and improvs, and...the different types of artistic support we could offer.

Vivian and Barbara arranged for Beth and the students to help with a rehearsal for their yearly CCF graduation performance. Reminiscing about the first time she and the two other students met TSC, Beth said she was “immediately taken with this group”:

We did a warm-up and an icebreaker, and I remember being struck by the group’s enthusiasm for it.... I was really impressed with how open they were, how willing to participate, nonjudgmental, and present they were. They were so committed to each moment of what we’d worried would have seemed like silly exercises. And then, when we listened to them read the script, the three of us were just completely blown away—not only by the material, but by their voices, the

way they performed, the way they read the material. It was just a casual table read, but something so powerful happened around that table, we sat speechless for a moment afterward....

Beth and the other students broke TSC into smaller groups and worked with them on staging and bringing theatrical elements into the performance: “They loved getting on their feet with the material and there was so much joy in the process,” she remembered. They kept inviting the students back to Saturday rehearsals, but only Beth could attend: “I just kept going and I kept getting more and more involved.” Beth would subsequently continue her involvement and eventually took over a coordinating role, helped the group to get scripts together, and started to do some directing. By the next graduation, TSC members performed their scripts from memory and incorporated more staging, taking their performance to a new level of professionalism.

Beth cited one performance in particular as a “turning point” in TSC’s evolution of becoming more theatrically professional and sophisticated:

The group had always performed at the CCF graduations at the end of the year. [O]ne year we got invited to perform at CCF’s 10th Anniversary Gala.... We committed to making it a more polished performance.... [I]t was the first time we used scenes that we had performed at a past graduation. And we edited them together and we got a cast of ensemble members who were able to commit to weekly rehearsals for a month or two months. We did something like seven Saturdays in a row...with the set script that we had refined and polished in the beginning, and it was the first time we had that intense of a rehearsal schedule.... And I think the group really appreciated the feeling of being that secure when they were on stage, because they had prepared, you know, we had prepared so much that they could have that experience on stage of just really being in the moment....

Beth also felt that focusing on honing and crafting the scripts and choosing monologues and scenes to focus on during rehearsal made for better storytelling. As the relationship between TSC and Beth blossomed, she gained more of a prominent role in the group. Once TSC started performing outside of graduations, they gave Beth the title

of artistic director. This point in TSC's evolution reflected a more theatrically mature phase when their audiences widened and diversified.

This turning point of performing outside of graduations meant that TSC had to rehearse more frequently. The women began to reuse the same material, and, for 2 to 3 years afterwards, they started writing longer scripts for graduations, thereby amassing more new material. They wove this material together into a script which they called *The Letters Behind My Name*, which I discuss next in Chapter VI. That script enabled them to incorporate the scenes and monologues that the group found most compelling as well as to add in new material that they generated over time.

Chapter VI

MESSENGERS OF HOPE AND ASPIRATION:

THE THEMATICS OF A TSC PERFORMANCE

Introduction to *The Letters Behind My Name* Script

While the transformative impact of education on the lives of formerly incarcerated people is one of Theater for Social Change's (TSC) main messages, TSC performs numerous other thematics to inspire their audiences to join their social movement. For example, Chapter III presented the "Strong Black Woman" scene that shows that even under the constraints of structural and institutional violence, a Black women's agency and hope provide her the key to realize her dreams. As the literature from Chapters II and III showed, formerly incarcerated women of color thriving in the face of the collateral consequences of mass incarceration are dependent on opportunities for self-improvement, self-actualization, and articulating their own stories in their own language and on their own terms.

This chapter focuses on the additional thematics that emerged from my analysis of TSC's scripts and performances. I start by describing a TSC performance of *The Letters Behind My Name*, a script that TSC used as a way to scaffold different scenes and monologues developed over the years, the selection of which depended on the priorities of the venue that invited TSC to perform. For example, if an advocacy event focused on

reentry issues, scenes and monologues related to reentry themes would be selected for that performance. If a conference focused on trauma and healing, scenes and monologues could be chosen that best support the goals of the conference, as was the case for an ensemble performance in Asheville, North Carolina. There is also a pragmatism in this flexible script format: ensemble members' availability for performances varies depending on their work and family schedules; in *The Letters Behind My Name*, some ensemble members can play different roles in different scenes, but monologues are always performed by their authors, so which scenes and monologues are chosen also depends on who is available for a given performance.

The performance I present here took place at Lycoming College, a small liberal arts college in rural Williamsport, Pennsylvania. To generate these themes, I employed critical and cultural theory-based analytical approaches that I cultivated during my undergraduate and graduate studies, focusing on the study of semiotics, media, film, literature, and fine arts. I chose to focus my analysis on this performance because it is illustrative of the diversity of themes and messages that emerge from TSC's personal storytelling. After presenting the performance, I provide an overview of the themes that run throughout the scenes and monologues that TSC created over the years. Finally, I focus on the main social change messages that TSC employs to redefine the terms of their recognition and to inspire other formerly incarcerated women to join them on their paths to achieve their hopes and dreams.

***The Letters Behind My Name* at Lycoming College**

Lycoming College is a small liberal arts undergraduate college located in the city of Williamsport, nearly 200 miles west of New York City. The college invited TSC to perform a version of *The Letters Behind My Name* on March 14, 2014. Beth and the five ensemble members who were available to take off work for 2 days to perform piled into a van in East Harlem early in the morning on the day of the performance. Balancing coffee and breakfast sandwiches on their laps, they buckled themselves in and took off through New York City's morning commute traffic headed west towards Williamsport. Linda Faye drove the van and Tataria deejayed the soundtrack to the road trip. Everyone else sat in the back seats of the van, catching up on what was going on in their lives, laughing, chattering, and singing and grooving to the music.

Williamsport is the seat of Lycoming County, a relatively rural area that sits atop the division between the Appalachian Mountains and the Alleghany Plateau. The environment of Lycoming is very different from the usual backdrop of most TSC performances in New York City, with its crowded city streets, dense buildings, and the din of living and working in an urban metropolis. Lycoming's Gender Studies Program and the Criminal Justice and Theater Departments co-sponsored the performance and post-performance discussion of *The Letters Behind My Name*. Lycoming's audience that evening was full of strangers, apart from the faculty members who acted as liaisons to Beth and Vivian for the planning of the event, yet, as they always do, TSC performed stories of intimate and seminal moments from their personal histories.

The performance opened with a comedic sketch of Denise hiding out from the police. In a hushed tone, she answers a phone call, playing both roles of caller and the person on the other end of the call:

–Hello?
 –Can I speak to Mr. Robinson?
 –He’s busy.
 –Can I speak to Mr. Brown?
 –He’s busy, too.
 –Well, who else is there?
 –The police are here.
 –Well, can I speak to the police?
 –They’re busy.
 –Well, what’s everybody over there busy doing?
 –They’re busy looking for me.

The audience laughed audibly, and, after a beat, the rest of the ensemble members came forward, surrounding Denise, to perform a scene called “Stereotypes Intro.” The mood quickly turned somber because of the judgmental and harsh language voiced by the performers, a far cry from the tone of levity with which Denise opened the performance. Seemingly, they are judging Denise while also judging themselves:

TATARIA: Funny, you don’t look like you’ve been in jail.
 LINDA: Ex-Con.
 SISTER X: Career Criminal.
 TAMI: Do you really think that people can change?
 LINDA: I used to see people look at me like: *She ain’t never gonna be nothing.*
 SISTER X: Do your children know what you did?
 TAMI: Today, at work, I interviewed an ex-con. And I survived.
 TATARIA: A ray of hope.
 TAMI: And you know, she seemed normal.

While the opening scene made light of the criminal justice system, “Stereotypes Intro” bluntly unearths the darkness and emotional pain of being involved in the system. The critical voices hit Denise in rapid-fire succession, signifying the internal and external messages that formerly incarcerated people are bombarded with as they navigate reentry into their families and communities, look for employment and housing, and applying to school to better themselves. There is one incongruous line, Tataria’s “ray of hope,” a carefully placed idea that conveys to the audience that, amid despair, self-doubt, and recriminations, one can find hopefulness and courage, foreshadowing Sister X’s monologue about identity transformation, “Three Names,” that comes next. In her monologue, the audience learns that Sister X was a drug dealer and was incarcerated in a state prison. They also discover that her life changed dramatically after she came home: “Working during the day, going to school at night, led me to an adjunct professor post.”

“Three Names” opens with Sister X disclosing her first name, her street name of “S”: “No one had time to say ‘Sissss-tahhhh-X,’ no way.... There wasn’t time for a whole name.” She then changes her tenor from youthful energy to disappointment and grief in telling her second name: “98G-0032. You never forget that number. In 1998, I was the 32nd woman to hit state ground.” Finally, her body language and tone of voice move from shame to pride when she is called by her third and final name, Professor X: “Now that’s music to my ears,” she beams.

The ensemble performs other stories of personal transformation. Tami’s monologue, “Trauma, My Grammar,” is a cleverly written poem about her struggle with and eventual mastery of grammar. This excerpt highlights key points along her quest to become a better writer, specifically the unrelenting negative reactions about her written

grammar that she suffered from professors and supervisors, and the tutoring support she received from CCF that helped her to become a competent writer and effective social worker:

Nouns, pronouns, verbs
 Adverbs/adjectives
 Conjunctions/prepositions
 You must get it right
 Or your supervisor or professor
 Will edit, you see....
 Words have power and order
 And you must place it right
 If you want to achieve.
 I needed extra help and
 Today my writing has improved
 You see.

A third story of transformation is performed by Linda Faye, who wrote the monologue called “Motherflowers” about the repairing of her relationship with her mother, mentioned earlier. Mixing a tinge of humor in with her tremendously painful memories, Linda Faye begins her monologue with her coming-out story:

LINDA: My mom had 13 brothers and sisters. And each of those 13 brothers and sisters had 3-4 kids, so that’s like 70 people, and out of all those 70 motherflowers, I was the only motherflower that was gay. I remember, growing up, when I first came out of the closet at 13, my mother wouldn’t walk in the street with me. She was so embarrassed by her daughter....

And when I got clean, and I learned how to speak to her, and let her know what I was feeling, that’s when she began to learn how to respect her daughter for her own desires, for what she was gonna do in her life.... And I told her, I said, You never told me you loved me. Not one day passed, from that day that I told her, I had like two years clean when I told her that, that she didn’t tell me she loved me and that we didn’t talk every day. Up until the day she died, every single day.

Linda Faye’s story has three interrelated transformations. First, Linda Faye changes from feeling unloved and unwanted because she was a lesbian to accepting and loving herself

for who she was. Her road to recovery was enabled through seeing her drug use as a means of self-medication. Finally, when she learned to love herself, she was able to tell her mother how she felt and what she needed from their relationship, thereby restoring and strengthening a deeply reciprocal mother-daughter bond.

Several scenes deal with TSC members' challenges in securing or maintaining jobs because of their criminal records. In one, Linda Faye is summoned to her boss's office for an early morning meeting, which creates tremendous anxiety for her because she assumes that he has found out about her criminal record and is planning to let her go:

LINDA: After a sleepless night I arrived at the Corporate Offices at 7:25 am. I stood outside and smoked a cigarette. Then...(beat)...I smoked another cigarette.

I finally resigned myself to my fate. Wait, what fate? I'd been doing nothing but my job the whole time I was there. In fact, I was doing my job so well—I'm a perfectionist—that I'd been appointed to a variety of committees and was well-received and respected by colleagues and executive management alike.

Oh, but the past still haunts me.... Even when I know my life has turned around, I revert right back to the mentality of that scared, incarcerated little girl, who had made so many bad decisions, who thought that she would never succeed because no one else thought she would, either.

After the inner turmoil of imagining her firing, Linda Faye is shocked to find out that her boss has called her into his office to give her a promotion. The scene drives home the internalized shame of the stigma of incarceration and the continuous self-doubt that it produces in Linda Faye, even in the face of evidence of her self-worth.

Sister X and Tami present another scene of the external stigma and discrimination facing people with criminal records at the workplace or in searching for a job. Sister X is

an adjunct professor who is well loved by her students. She is confident of her abilities; however, her excellence as an educator eventually overshadows her past criminal record:

Sister X: A few years ago, the director of the school where I was teaching called me into her office.

So, I'm wondering: Why does the director want to see me? I'm not worried. I'm a great teacher. My students love me! Maybe I'm going to get a promotion. Or maybe a raise!

Sister X meets with the director in her office.

Tami: Listen, you didn't tell me you were a criminal.

You didn't tell me you used to use drugs. Is this true? You used drugs? You were in jail?

Sister X: Yes, I did. Yes, it's true.

Tami: Why did you tell the class you were in jail?

Sister X: Well, I thought my story would be an inspiration to the students. I wanted to share with them that, no matter what happens in your life, your past decisions or choices that you make, you can still be somebody.

The following semester, Sister X calls the director to ask for her class. The director tells her that she will not be given a class and is not needed that semester. She ends the scene with this: "So my past finally caught up with me. It caught up with me and slapped me in the face."

In another scene, Linda Faye is searching for a job. Her resume proudly displays that she has a 4.0 grade point average in college and participated in 1,000 hours of volunteer time with the youth in her community. Yet over and over, in scenes recurring throughout the performance, she faces having to explain to a prospective employer why there is a large gap in her resume, which she calls "the space between time," rather than spending the interview time discussing her many successes and achievements. The last

time we see her being asked to explain her past, she responds with confidence and passion:

LINDA: It happened, I got through it, and now I'm here with a college degree ready to work. In fact, I was able to go to school while I was incarcerated, and that's when I began my career as an advocate, working to bring college courses to prison.

There's more to the story. After I returned to the community, I stayed connected with positive programs and people. Now, I have a tremendous community of support.

The ensemble joins her back on stage, a visual representation of her supportive community, in contrast to the opening scene where Denise is surrounded by people who judge and discriminate. In this final scene, the audience learns of the tremendous value of CCF and of being part of the TSC and larger community driving the movement to transform the justice system. The ensemble wraps up the performance with a litany of triumphs and proud accomplishments to replace each stereotype:

TATARIA: Funny, you don't look like you've been in jail.

SISTER X: Career Scholar.

LINDA: I used to see people look at me like, *she ain't never gonna be nothing*.

DENISE: It's walking into a classroom again for the first time in 33 years. Denise, Bachelor's of Science.

TAMI: I interviewed a formerly incarcerated woman today.

DENISE: Do you really think people can change?

TAMI: I told her my story. Tami, Bachelor's of Social Work.

TATARIA: Tataria, Master's of Social Work.

LINDA: Linda Faye, Master's of Social Work.

SISTER X: Sister X, BA, MA, MS, future PHD.

TATARIA: Our beginnings have been established, and our end is nowhere in sight.

Tataria's closing line orients the ensemble towards the future, bright with possibility, establishing that the "ray of hope" which may have seemed out of place at the beginning of the performance now envelopes all the women who performed, on stage, with tremendous pride.

The Letters Behind My Name is a short performance, but it transports the audience on an emotionally charged journey along with the ensemble members. Life journeys and personal transformations are told through moments of humor, pain, and hope within short monologues and scenes. The Lycoming student paper, *The Lycourier*, reported on the reaction that Dr. J. Stanley, chair of the Lycoming theater department, had from the performance:

Theatre for Social Change is genuine proof that the theatre is a living art form that can have an incredible impact on people's lives. The performers in 'The Letters Behind My Name' aren't acting in the sense that they are creating fictional characters. They are enacting themselves and their own experiences. I found the production very emotionally moving because the performers were so authentic; their joy, their pain was real and raw.... (Cuddahy, 2014, para. 2)

The authenticity of the personal stories deepens the audience's visceral response to and connection with the performance. Enacting—versus acting—is the power of personal storytelling through theater.

TSC's Themes, Thematics, and Social Change Messaging

The CCF website explains that TSC performances incorporate "themes ranging from community disinvestment to redemption to discrimination in the workplace." The themes are indeed diverse and varied, because the ensemble members' experiences are

diverse and varied. However, after analyzing the scenes and monologues, I found several overarching thematics that unite this diversity.

On stage, audiences see ensemble members navigate their *personal and social context*: coping with, processing, and surviving pain and trauma before, during, and after incarceration and through systemic, familial, or societal issues. Audiences see the impacts of *the stigma of incarceration*: the internalization of and the accompanying feelings of hopelessness, self-doubt, and low self-esteem that come from external messages of the stigma of justice system involvement and stereotypes of justice-involved people, and how this affects transitioning out of prison, one's self-esteem, and one's sense of self-efficacy. Audiences see *the lived experiences of punitive systems, institutions, and policies*: the collateral consequences and policies of punishment within the mass incarceration and reentry systems and the myth of second chances. Audiences see ensemble members *engaging in transformations*: healing, recovery, and educational and community empowerment. Audiences see *the power of the collective community*: advocacy by and self-determination of people directly impacted by the justice system and other institutional and systemic injustices to transform these systems, and their peer-to-peer support. TSC scripts and monologues are ultimately a collective story of women living out their vision for their personal and communal dreams and aspirations, with their sights set on building a just world within the constraints of injustice.

The CCF website also states that “performances have the power to change hearts and minds when it comes to stereotypes and misconceptions about what it means to have been to prison, and about mass incarceration.” I found that this message of changing the narrative and stereotypes about the worth of formerly incarcerated people indeed runs

throughout the ensemble's themes, but I also found the message that hope and community are essential to creating the strength and fortitude that formerly incarcerated people draw from to repel negativity and stigma, and to effect social change and to reimagine a world where they can thrive. This next section describes these two central messages that weave in and out of the themes, and are, ultimately, two central components that drive the power of TSC's performances.

Disrupting Stereotypes and Creating Visibility

The deliberate and explicit advocacy goal of disrupting stereotypes is most evident in two scenes from the above performance of *The Letters Behind My Name*, known as "Stereotypes Intro" and "Stereotypes Ending." During the period of this research, 2015-2018, TSC started and ended many of their performances with different versions of these two scenes:

ARLENE: Funny, you don't look like you've been in jail.

LINDA: Ex-Con.

SISTER X: Career Criminal.

ARLENE: Do you really think that people can change?

LINDA: I used to see people look at me like: She ain't never gonna be nothin'

DENISE: Do your children know what you did?

LESLIE: Today, at work, I interviewed an ex-con. And you know, she seemed normal.

The ensemble challenges these stereotypes with positive, empowering examples of transformation and successes from their own lives and their own communities.

“Stereotypes Ending” reveals ensemble members’ personal transformations and new identities:

DENISE: I say; it’s walking into a classroom again for the first time in 33 years. It’s staying in school the second time around with support from my peers.

SWEETNESS: I say; you don’t see the scars of my incarceration; because of education; YOU SEE LIBERATION!

LINDA: I used to see people look at me like: *She ain’t never gonna be nothin.*

LESLIE: I interviewed a formerly incarcerated woman today....

FELICIA: You have no idea of the number of years and tears in this group....

SISTER X: Career Scholar.

SWEETNESS: Funny, you don’t look like you’ve been in jail.

ARLENE: ...I told her my story.

In this scene, TSC employs positive language that replaces negative stereotypes. For example, “Career Criminal” becomes “Career Scholar.” Positive educational narratives replace single stories: “staying in school the second time around with support from my peers” and “because of education; YOU SEE LIBERATION!”

The line “I used to see people look at me like: *She ain’t never gonna be nothin*” now has new meaning because, after the entirety of the performance, the audience now knows that the ensemble members have successfully defied internalized and external expectations of failure. For example, Linda Faye’s monologue about being called into her boss’s office and imagining her firing rather than predicting her promotion was an example of internalized stigma. That internalized shame stems from societal stereotypes that define formerly incarcerated people as criminals in perpetuity.

The line, “I interviewed a formerly incarcerated woman today...I told her my story,” also has deep significance by the end of the performance. It alludes to scenes performed earlier by ensemble members who experienced discriminatory interview and employment practices that stigmatize formerly incarcerated people. In response, telling one’s personal story (“my story”) is empowering. Sharing one’s story with others who are going through similar experiences (“I told her my story”) empowers others. It shows the value of replacing the shame of one’s past with pride in one’s story of transformation, accomplishments, and bright future—confounding the stereotypes by reshaping the narrative of one’s past.

Second, the line, “I interviewed a formerly incarcerated woman today,” shows that ensemble members are now in management positions where they have the power to hire others, and where the visibility of their story can empower others; they can change the interview experience for other formerly incarcerated people to be humanizing, demonstrating why it is important for formerly incarcerated people to take on visible leadership roles.

In her well-known (2009) TED Talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, author Chimamanda Adichie described why “single stories,” or, more familiarly, stereotypes, are problematic, as “[they] show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become” (09:17). She elaborated on why single stories can become dangerous: “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (12:50). She defined stereotypes as incomplete and unidimensional.

The ensemble members' stories are incomplete when they are defined only by their crimes or for what they were sentenced. The missing parts of their stories are the realities of their traumas and the social injustices that they have experienced, such as attending under-funded and failing schools; battling untreated drug addiction, homophobia, and racism; or surviving domestic or neighborhood violence. The justice system assumes an essential binary of victim versus perpetrator, a product of the unwillingness to acknowledge the structural violence faced chronically by low-income communities of color. The full stories told by the TSC members show that this victim/perpetrator binary often takes hold within an individual's life, and that these policies and structures can push people who are victims further into the category of criminality.

TSC adds layers and complexity to single stories by sharing perspectives on their personal and collective stories. It disrupts stereotypes by providing a more complete picture of the women's lives and their communities, stories that show their humanity in the context in which their biographies are situated. Sister X illustrated this by reflecting on her own situation:

I think a lot of people don't see people [who have] been in prison as people.... They just see us as...the bad guys.... [Y]ou committed crimes and you deserve to be in jail and that's it.... [T]he public [doesn't] realize that there's a story behind [the crime]. [L]ike with me, like when I started using drugs...I didn't really set out to wanna be on drugs. And I didn't set out to...live a life of crime. You know, and I didn't even consider it crime. I consider, it was a job for me. Like that was actually where I was getting money to take care of my family....

Sister X grew up in poverty, and, for her family, the drug trade put food on the table. As her parents had, when she became an adult she struggled to pay the bills, and this grew harder when she became a single mother. Factors such as intergenerational poverty, lack

of a college degree, and drug use are linked to justice system involvement; for Sister X, instead of being offered avenues to self-improvement by the systems with which she came into contact, she was instead punished for being poor and using drugs, and was sent to prison instead of college and drug treatment.

By not understanding Sister X's complete story that includes the injustices done to her, these systems are not able to respond to her needs or take responsibility for how and why they failed her. Sharon's story is another example of how the victim/perpetrator binary creates a partial story, obscuring her suffering. In the following monologue, she provides her own picture of the traumas that she has experienced over the course of her life:

Trauma
 Do you mean three days before your wedding
 your fiancé dies
 or
 all your childhood friends
 gone before the age of twenty-five
 eleven years for defending your life.
 parents gone by sixty-five years of their life
 or
 seeing your partner battle several cancers
 for several years
 nah, I don't know trauma—just crisis-mode tears

During our conversation, Sharon spoke of feeling remorse for taking the life of her attacker and thought of the loss that his family must have felt. Yet the justice system never acknowledged that Sharon was a victim as well. Had she been White, chances are much greater that she would not have served time in prison or might have had a much shorter sentence. As she noted, "There was more than one casualty. My daughter suffered; my parents suffered." She missed her daughter's childhood, coming home from prison when her daughter was 21. Her parents died before she came home. This

accumulation of trauma is invisible to those who are not part of a family and community like Sharon's, where systemic and institutional trauma is common, and family members have suffered the consequences of a loved one being removed from their lives. This is particularly hard on the children of incarcerated parents; both Sister X's and Sharon's children suffered from being separated from their mothers.

Sister X's and Sharon's personal stories and perspectives illustrate the critical importance of how one's biography gives a fuller picture and context for an individual's criminal justice system involvement, as well as linking it to their family and community well-being. Vivian stated:

What I observe is that there is some type of power that's regained by saying here is my story and here is my view of justice and somewhere in the middle is... somewhere between my story and justice is the fact that while I may have...made mistakes, somewhere there is injustice, right, that is deeply embedded in my personal story. And part of the way I move toward justice is to help people acknowledge that there was injustice done to me in my life and to have them to see...to have them acknowledge that means I have to tell my story.

TSC's performances take up many reentry issues as well as their intersectional identities. These include the intergenerational impacts of mass incarceration, poverty, employment and educational access discrimination, and trauma—issues that are often unseen by those who have never experienced the justice system firsthand.

Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality called for a centering of Black women's experiences as a starting point for addressing their needs and nurturing their empowerment. According to Crenshaw, the centering of people whose experiences of oppression are invisible to those closer to privilege and power, even within the movements to dismantle oppression, will transform the way that anti-oppression movements approach their work, to be inclusive of the voices and needs of those

historically most marginalized or effaced. The theoretical centering of formerly incarcerated women is achieved symbolically and physically when TSC commands the stage, in how they represent themselves, and through their personal narratives. It helps highlight how the systems with which these women come into contact would be designed very differently if policymakers and practitioners placed the health and well-being of low-income women of color at the center of their work. This type of policy redesign is discussed in greater detail in Chapter VIII.

The first time that I sat down to talk with a few of TSC's ensemble members to discuss this research project, Cheryl expressed her imperative to perform her personal story: "We cannot NOT tell our story." She explained that from the time of her arrest through the end of her trial, a woman is told by her lawyer that disclosing her personal story to anyone other than legal counsel might hurt her case, and that only her lawyer can speak for her, deciding what she should or should not say during her trial. The process of navigating the criminal justice system is, therefore, a continual process of non-disclosure, secrecy, and control. Cheryl explained what that does to a woman's identity: "[she] can go through a whole period of time in prison and not say anything about their crime. So when you're not saying anything, then society sees you as just an animal."

During a later discussion, Cheryl offered further explanation:

[There was a time when people were] advocating for us before we could advocate for ourselves...telling our story. I can remember [a] time when the largest community-based organizations in the city that were working with people who had criminal records all had White women running their center or organization...and they were the ones that were telling the stories of the population...which they were serving. And we got to the point where we could tell our own story...because we feel like we know better than somebody who hasn't lived the life that we've lived...we appreciate all that you've done...to this point, but it's time to let us fly and us tell our own stories.

To illustrate, Cheryl pointed to an example of the 2003 award-winning documentary, *What I Want My Words to Do to You: Voices From Inside a Women's Maximum Security Prison*, that presented parts of writing workshop sessions at Bedford Hills led by playwright Eve Ensler. The Bedford Hills-incarcerated women who participated in the workshops allowed the filmmakers to document their often-emotional writing process and exploration of their painful life histories, their crimes, and the essence of who they are as women. Cheryl explained:

What I Want My Words to Do to You humanize[s] women who may have committed an unthinkable crime. But now you get to see...her story and not just the incident, but maybe what her childhood was like, what led up to that. And some of it was really compelling...I mean it grabbed a lot of people.... And in there, we had some star power. So actors were able to tell their stories on the outside and be the voice for the women who were on the inside. And people like Glenn Close, Marisa Tomei, and Rosie Perez all played a role in...being an actor for somebody on the inside. *But now we're home, and we can [tell] our own stories. And so that's what Theater for Social Change is. [W]e go up and we tell our own stories* [emphasis added].

Cheryl highlighted another key for understanding why the women of TSC engage in personal storytelling through theater: that it is time for formerly incarcerated women to tell their own stories in public. Prison, like the court system, takes away one's voice and one's humanity. While Eve Ensler's credibility was able to open up a window, or, more aptly, a crack in the prison wall that offered a momentary glimpse into women prisoners' lives and subjectivities, the women's writings featured in the workshop were brought into public view by actors. While the actors' star power drew attention to the complexities of incarcerated women's lives, it was still the actors who spoke for the incarcerated women.

Cheryl expressed her appreciation for Ensler and for the powerful performances of the actors, as well as for reentry organizations, all speaking on behalf of the women who were removed from society: out of sight, warehoused, locked up—in short, rendered

invisible. Cheryl declared that the time has come for formerly incarcerated women to speak for themselves and that TSC is actively and purposefully taking up that charge.

The Necessity of Hope and Dreaming

As was the case during the the Lycoming performance, Tataria's line, "A ray of hope," is often incorporated into "Stereotypes Intro" and "Stereotypes Ending." During the time leading up to the point at which I presented my dissertation proposal to and received permission from TSC to engage in the project, I saw TSC perform over a dozen times in different types of venues. What struck me immediately about the ensemble was that the notion of hope was embedded throughout their performances and ways of interacting with the audience. During performances, the "ray of hope" line is usually delivered by Tataria, who also frequently introduces herself during talk-backs as Tataria "Keep Hope Alive" Watkins.

After one of these performances, I stumbled upon a well-known quote about the notion of hope from Vaclav Havel (1990), the formerly incarcerated playwright, political dissident, and eventual President of the Czech Republic, in a 1990 book, *Disturbing the Peace*, based on a series of interviews with Havel conducted with journalist Karel Hvížd'ala from 1985 to 1986. At that time, before completing my proposal, I emailed Havel's quote to the ensemble because, based on what I was learning about TSC through observation, the concept had resonance. Once interviews and discussions began in earnest, the term and notion of hope became more prevalent in this research project, and now Havel's rumination on hope fully reverberates because I now understand TSC as the embodiment and public enactment of hope. Here is Havel's take on hope:

The kind of hope I often think about...I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us, or we don't.... Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart....

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpromising the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. (p. 82)

Havel, TSC, and many other social and political movement protagonists are motivated by the deeply held notion that their vision of what is right and what is just supersedes the sacrifices, frustrations, and pain that often accompany the fight against oppression.

Paulo Freire (1992) passionately argued that there is a vital link between liberation and hope in creating the conditions for social transformation. He dedicated an entire book to the necessity for hope in liberation movements; this work is aptly named *The Pedagogy of Hope*. “Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle.... Hence the need for a kind of education in hope” (p. 3). Tami recalled during her interview that when she got to CCF, she “really didn’t have hope.” She gained that hope through two ways—seeing her sisters succeeding and then seeing herself succeed. Linda Faye remarked that a fellow CCF graduate who completed law school and passed the bar gave her hope; at a talk-back, she shared with the audience: “CCF gave me the hope and the strength and the courage to return to that college and continue through and actually move forward.” She and other TSC ensemble members view their performances as ways of imparting hope for other formerly incarcerated people. TSC employs in its writing, and then models in performance, a pedagogy of hope, in tandem with the

women's struggles and journeys, for their audiences—and for themselves—each time they perform.

Freire (1992) further asserted that dreaming is also integral to the process of transforming societies: “There is no change without dream as there is no change without hope” (p. 77). Creativity and valor are necessary to imagine and to dream of a different future, school environment, system of justice, or community than the ones that are authored by racist master narratives, oppressive institutions, and internalized oppression. The material that TSC collectively generates demonstrates the role of theater in enabling the reimagination of our current and past systems and structures, as well as exploring one's past lived experiences within these systems and structures and future realities under a new set of conditions yet to be played out. Community-based theatrical performance “has the capacity to not just interpret the past, but to try out possible futures” (pp. 5-6), as drama scholar Jan Cohen-Cruz (2005) wrote.

Lorde (2007) pushed back against those who argue that dreaming is an extravagance. She positioned dreaming and envisioning (through poetry and writing) as a source of strength. Through dreams, one finds power because dreams connect to the feelings that are enabled when the conditions of dehumanization are obliterated. “[Feelings] surface in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. Those dreams are made realizable through our poems because they give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare” (p. 39). TSC invites other formerly incarcerated women to dream, and challenges society to tear down the policies, practices, and societal stigmas that smother these dreams. TSC provokes clandestine dreamers, as well as proverbial gate keepers, by asking, rhetorically:

TAMI: Why should I be the keeper of your dreams?

LINDA: I don't really want you to dream at all.

SHARON: Because (guess what) your dreams just might come true.

During her interview, Linda Faye connected having access to inspiration for hope to the process of self-actualization:

...having women like us, or women...to look up to, gives [our community] hope that we don't have to be forced to go into a [role] that society puts us in.... You gotta have the strength to take on what society is going to dump on your plate as you try to pursue your goals. Doesn't mean that you can't do it.... How hard do you want to work to achieve it? Because you can achieve anything.

At the center of the ensemble members' reflections is the idea that the first step to embracing hope and permitting oneself to dream is often unlocked by seeing others who came before them achieve their dreams.

Ensemble members know from personal experience that the road they will travel will not be a smooth path, so having support and knowing the challenges that await are ways to protect oneself along the journey. Through their poetics, TSC sounds the warning:

DENISE: Why do you even have the right to dream?

TAMI: You took that road to prison, not I.

MISSY: Like they say, you get what your hand calls for.

LINDA: Now you want to dream big...and journey on my side?

SHARON: Wrap your dreams up? Please.

DENISE: I am not concerned with your heart melodies.

MISSY: You're becoming teachers, nurses, CEO's, researchers, policymakers, executive directors, voters, judges, advocates for social change....

The journey is fraught with messages of doubt from naysayers, who come in many forms—society, institutions, the media, the criminal justice system, and even the voices in one’s head that seep in from external messages and their messengers. Recalling Appadurai (2004), the roads to aspiration have historically been reserved for those in power. TSC infers that those in power guard the road and seldom offer to share it with the dispossessed, but, the dispossessed, perhaps with trepidation, take their journeys nonetheless. The road may be treacherous for formerly incarcerated women of color, but the more who travel it—and travel it together, supporting each other by instilling hope and dreaming with and for each other—the more opportunities and networks open up to enable the success of others. This is one way in which the capacity to aspire becomes more entrenched. Revisiting Nussbaum’s internal capabilities approach to building a threshold for human development and dignity, one can view hope and dreaming as internal capabilities that nurture people fighting for justice to envision alternative futures or a new way of seeing themselves in the world, as well as combined capabilities that are forged as a community in order to create the world in which they can live out their full potential.

On stage, TSC invokes education as having the power to liberate, the antithesis of imprisonment and structural and institutional violence: “Sweetness: I say; you don’t see the scars of my incarceration; because of education; YOU SEE LIBERATION!” hooks (1994) reflected on her experiences as a child in classes taught by Black women who were dedicated to “education as a the practice of freedom”—“a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization” (p. 2). Adding another dimension to the education-liberation framework is hope, as hooks (2004)

argued. The act of educating “is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness” (p. xiv), she stated, finding inspiration in Mary Grey’s (2001) notion of hope:

“Hope stretches the limits of what is possible. It is linked with that basic trust in life without which we could not get from one day to the next.... To live by hope is to believe that it is worth taking the next step: that our actions, our families, and cultures and society have meaning, are worth living and dying for. Living in hope says to us, ‘There is a way out,’ even from the most dangerous and desperate situations....” (pp. xiv-xv)

Per hooks (2004), hope links personal freedom with community liberation, as does liberatory education that cultivates personal agency and strengthens community. Like hooks, TSC celebrates education as liberation, and an education in the capacity to aspire sends the message to their audiences that there is a way out—for formerly incarcerated individuals and for society. Each can choose a different path: from a personal standpoint, a new life path; from a societal path, the creation of just social policies and institutions. TSC is living proof that there is a *ray of hope* and that *deferred dreams are merely temporary delays*. The social movement to end mass incarceration is societal proof that a different world is possible.

Amplifying the Voice, Controlling the Message, and Claiming the Power

As TSC’s messages reveal, stereotypes, or, per Adichie (2009), incomplete stories, harm formerly incarcerated women because they define them by only one part of their past—their criminal records—and constrain them. Stereotypes and stigma have dual negative effects. When internalized, they harm one’s self-esteem and self-confidence, inhibiting the ability to imagine and achieve one’s potential. When they affect policies and institutional practices, they have material consequences that constrain one’s opportunities. In short, internalized and social stigma limit human potential. Seeing and

acknowledging one's full biography as including the structural constraints and injustices that shaped one's past is critical for formerly incarcerated women to rebuild their identities and to reimagine their histories. Telling stories to disrupt stereotypes is a way to self-actualize and create personal change.

Hopelessness prevents one from conceiving of a different trajectory or new identity. If one cannot dream of a different future, one cannot achieve it. Messages of hope and dreaming create a future orientation. Dreaming free from internalized shame is a way to move past what has been imposed upon an individual by society, a way to disrupt stereotypes. Finding inspiration in role models who have defied stereotypes and achieved their dreams creates hope—and provides the proof—that dreams do come true. Telling stories as a community of role models and messengers of hope is a means for enabling others who are feeling despair to allow themselves to dream their futures anew.

Returning to Adichie (2009), she stated that, once a single story is entrenched, it gains power. She explained:

There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is “nkali.” It’s a noun that loosely translates to “to be greater than another.” Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. (09:30)

This idea resonates with Cheryl's declaration that “narrators are everything.” As narrators of their own lives, TSC is working in defiance of the narrators who paint a unidimensional picture of justice-involved women.

For ensemble members, theater is a powerful platform for amplifying their voices and controlling and directing their social change messages to people in positions of power. Sister X declared that:

Theater gives me a voice that I didn't have before. I could never get a group of university people or lawmakers.... I could never get their attention before and get them to listen to anything that I had to say. Now I get them to come in and sit down to see a performance.

Several other ensemble members spoke of theater giving them a voice, as well as permitting them to be voices for women still in prison who are not yet able to voice their own stories and social change messages. There was a shared sense that TSC feels a commitment to represent this community.

As a concrete example of TSC's ability to control their social change narrative, Cheryl related the following story in her interview. A foundation program officer attended the graduation where TSC ended their performance with the line, "Today you graduate, tomorrow you advocate." She heard the officer use those exact words a year later in a different forum, in referring to the issues for which TSC stands and advocates. TSC's message had spread from the performance and audience to someone who has access to power, namely, a representative of a well-heeled foundation that was supportive of justice system reform work. This is the amplification of TSC's voices that represents their ability to effect real and concrete social change.

Chapter VII

TSC'S COLLECTIVE IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND CREATIVE PROCESS

Introduction: The Value of the Ensemble Way of Working

From the first time that she attended a rehearsal, Beth, TSC's former artistic director, saw a vibrant performance ensemble. As she recalled:

[TSC was] functioning as an ensemble already...the writing is collective and the art-making is collective is completely intertwined with the point of or purpose of the ensemble and the material that we create.... The work felt radical, it felt like the performance art of that time...the stories that really needed to be told...

Beth was well-schooled in applied theater, so she recognized immediately that TSC's collective nature, process, and storytelling were inseparable from their social change mission.

The term "theater ensemble" implies a "way of working" (Radosavljević, 2013, p. xi) that emphasizes process and a commitment to core principles, in deliberate contrast with a conventional theater model that has traditionally been hierarchical, elevating the role of the director and playwright above the performers. Per Radosavljević, "The 'ensemble way of working' is understood to represent a work ethos which is collective, creative and collaborative" (p. 11). TSC fostered this process and ensemble identity over the years, whereby it created collaboratively written scripts whose authorship is credited as "Written and performed by College and Community Fellowship's Theater for Social Change ensemble."

This chapter focuses on the collective nature of the ensemble, its sisterhood, and how this type of community fosters a space for the collective creation process. Within this space of community support, ensemble members feel free to dig deeply into their pasts, their dreams, their inner lives, and their traumas and vulnerabilities.

TSC's Collective Community: Shared Identity and Diversity

For Vivian, “[TSC] is about community and it is about a collective understanding of that what we are together is stronger than what we are individually.” This supports Radosavljević’s (2013) notion that in an ensemble, “the whole [is] greater than the sum of its parts....” Denise described the ensemble as “a bunch of powerful women. [she laughs] That’s it! I think we have a bunch of amazing women in that group and you can take something from each and every one of them and it’d be something different.” According to Sharon, the different contributions are stronger when presented as an ensemble, through collective storytelling:

It’s the togetherness that makes the performance what it is.... [But] everyone’s story is unique and it’s telling. [S]omebody else might have had [a] same similar experience, but we all bring something different. We all bring a different type of creativity that makes it a collective expression that a one person [show] just could not bring to the table, you know?... Believe it or not, even with the seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven...each one’s story is different....

Each ensemble member brings her own individual experiences to the collective through the creation of scenes or monologues, or through artistic self-expression in the form of poetry or song. She may make different contributions to the process and performance, but she is viewed as equally important to the ensemble. In practice, TSC’s collective identity is not more important than each individual’s story or individual poetic expression. This is the essence and distinctiveness of the ensemble’s identity as a

collective of women who have unbreakable bonds and a shared identity, but also whose lives have been shaped differently by their diverse backgrounds, cultures, faiths, personal qualities, strengths, and talents. Their collective identity must therefore be understood simultaneously as commonalities and as differences, and, as a result, a TSC show is a performance of both shared identity and diversity.

Regarding shared identity, TSC's commitment to being a women's performance collective is significant. Growing out of CCF, an organization developed to serve formerly incarcerated women specifically, influenced the type of community that TSC developed. As Cheryl pointed out during her interview, TSC reflects CCF's theory of change that women's reentry journeys differ from men's because their experiences as mothers, sisters, partners, and nurturers are gendered. For example, navigating reentry while trying to reestablish one's relationships and roles as mothers and/or daughters, or healing from the pain of missing large parts of their kids' childhoods can be unique to women's experiences. Ensemble members expressed over and over again that these shared experiences create bonds and trust that enable healing.

On the other hand, women's role as nurturers and anchors in their families and communities are strengths that the CCF and TSC community draw upon. As Vivian pointed out during a post-performance discussion, the power of CCF is that the women who participate as fellows share their resources and social capital to strengthen not only the CCF community but also their extended families and neighborhood communities. Women bring their families and communities into these spaces of support. TSC's sisterhood is deep and far-reaching because they not only share the experiences of being CCF fellows and contributing to this community, but also the all-women's collective

creation, rehearsal, and performance experiences intensified their shared bonds and identity.

Ensemble members also spoke of the personal growth they experienced engaging in the diversity within their collective community. Arlene explained:

From me, they learned what growing up in a Puerto Rican family is like, and from Alesa, I've learned what a southern Black family is like. Different cultures. Tami has talked a lot about her grandmother and her family, and what it was like.... [E]ach one of us have shared about what it was like in their families, or in their schools. And we've learned about each other. [I]t's been an education, and it's been a great one.

From her sister ensemble members, Tataria spoke of learning about the difficulties of obtaining Section 8 housing as an HIV-positive person and that the “journey” of her relationship with her husband is similar to what same-sex partners experience.

As discussed in Chapter VI, because scripts are woven together with scenes and monologues, the scripts offer flexibility for some ensemble members to play different roles in different scenes. A few ensemble members cited the experience of performing other ensemble members' material as worthwhile because it develops empathy and connection. Tataria said, “I think...it does give you an opportunity to...walk in someone else's shoes.” Additionally, ensemble members enjoy the experience of working on someone else's role because it allows them to learn more about the story author's life. It lets each other into another's worlds in greater depth and with more nuance. Often cited was Cheryl's interview scene, where she is repeatedly asked about her criminal record instead of her many accomplishments. The scene helped ensemble members educate others at their workplaces about job application discrimination facing formerly incarcerated people, even if they themselves had not experienced this bias. Sister X said she regularly performed Cheryl's interview scene at her job to educate her co-workers.

On the other hand, some ensemble members brought their own ideas and creativity to someone else's story and made the character their own, even if they had not developed them originally.

Building Trust and a Safe Space Through the Writing Process

As shown in Chapter V, TSC started out as process-oriented rather than outcomes-focused. According to Pinhasi-Vittorio and Martinsons (2008), the process had the following structure. First, the group would work off a prompt to launch a freewriting session, which was a way for them to work individually through painful or challenging experiences and emotions. Next, they shared their freewriting by reading one's own work aloud or reading each other's work aloud. Finally, they engaged in group dialogue about the themes and emotions that surfaced during both writing and sharing, which led the ensemble members to act as a sounding board and supportive community for each other.

Building this understanding within the community took time. Tami explained the evolution in this way:

When we first started with it...we didn't know each other. We didn't feel as comfortable with each other. We [weren't] willing to open up like we do [now], but as you stay together for as long as we've been together, we've learned [about] each other.... I think they pretty much know what makes me tick, I know what makes them tick. We believe in each other, we're open to each other. We see that we're not out to hurt each other, so we take risks with our stories when we tell each other.

The writing and sharing process had a dynamic relationship with the group-building process because it helped members get to know each other, which in turn deepened the creative process and then continued to strengthen the group's sense of trust and comradery.

Early TSC was a highly emotive and self-exploratory process that involved “digging in deep within ourselves,” per Cheryl. Cheryl also found the process of writing and then sharing it out loud to be rich and rewarding.

The process for me is everything. The process is during a time when you may not have said that out loud to anybody, you know, whatever we’re writing about. And so there’s crying. You know, there’s laughter. There’s hugging...it allows me to write and to think about things that's happened in my life that I may not have said before ever. You know, just to first write it down and repeat it back and say it out loud is...wow.

Cheryl’s reflection on the therapeutic value of the material-generating process was shared by almost all ensemble members.

Group work also involved connecting this emotional processing to social and political issues and contexts. Pinhasi-Vittorio and Martinsons (2008) explained that a large part of the group work centered on “emotional talk in the community” (p. 83), as they titled a section of their article on group processing. This emotional talk had intensity:

Often, the essays, dialogues, poems, or stories written by group members provoked heated discussion about topics that would be considered controversial or sensitive in many settings. However, our understanding that we are a community made expressing emotion easier and feelings more accessible. (p. 83)

Intense dialogue about controversial topics that took place in a setting where trust and well-being were regarded as paramount resulted in ensemble members forming the type of community where conflicts or disagreements would not break the bonds of the sisterhood that developed. An ensemble member shared:

[We] all got [strong] personalities...sometimes I want to just shake [someone but] you know what? We’re all human, we all bleed, we all have feelings...everybody has a personality. How can you work with that personality? I can’t run from every personality. I have to learn how to fit in.

Arlene explained that she learned how to be a deep listener from being part of the theater group process:

When we're in rehearsal, when someone else is speaking, or, you know, or giving an idea, or even sharing something personal, we need to shut up and listen. I've developed *reflective listening*, to use a phrase I learned at work, and now I have a name for it!

In order to participate fully in TSC, one must develop the skills of tolerance, patience, and being present in the moment. These skills are tremendously important for maintaining healthy work and personal relationships, effective leadership, and building community.

The Process of Bearing Witness

Even in the later period of TSC's evolution, the writing process within the TSC community setting continued to have tremendous value for participants. Sweetness shared how she felt during group brainstorming sessions:

[There are] unique artistic... juices flow constantly, a moment of divine splendor, happens in the group. You can look forward to that. [Y]ou'll be blessed to get it. [A]nd that's been part of my experience being a member of TSC, and there are times when I don't want to be anywhere else. I have moments that I know I'm supposed to be here, and I'm grateful that I'm here. And I value, literally value a piece of paper and a pen that works, because I know the juices will flow just from a mere suggestion. I've been given some direction um, with maybe ten words do something, whatever the direction is, and then from that, I'm able to empty myself out. You know, and that doesn't happen in my bathroom, it doesn't happen in my bedroom. It doesn't happen in my, I don't know, my kitchen. So I have to come to the table at TSC to have that moment.... There's moments of chaos that I question myself as to why did you get in the car and come here? And then there's moments where I wouldn't exchange for nothing [the] experience...*witnessing someone else having, maybe, a breakthrough or revelation.*

Sweetness savored every moment of her own writing process, but found it equally valuable witnessing a fellow ensemble member also have a transformational experience.

Seeing one of her sisters have a breakthrough was empowering for her and for the TSC community.

Another dimension of witnessing is the empathy that one experiences seeing fellow ensemble members perform their stories. Vivian said:

Every time Linda Faye does [her “Motherflowers”] monologue, it touches my heart like I’ve heard it for the first time because it’s so real. And it speaks to the trauma that we’ve all experienced in our lives and the points at which we all need healing.

Because TSC is first and foremost a collective community, when one member of the community rises, all ensemble members are elevated, and when one member of the community goes through a healing process, it also brings healing to the entire ensemble. It is a collective step in achieving well-being for their community.

The experience of ensemble members’ witnessing each other’s process or performance came up several times during interviews and focus groups. Tami understood group building and the act of making theater as reciprocal and iterative: the ensemble is the first audience for a new piece or idea to explore. She is often in awe of or impressed with the other ensemble members’ writing and, later on, their performances. She said in a focus group: “One time we did the show, I wanted to cry [during] the show listening to all our stories.” This attests to the mutual admiration, emotional connection, and respect that TSC ensemble members have for each other.

Another facet of the witnessing process is being heard. Sweetness opened up during a focus group about what it was like to move from her written ideas staying within herself to sharing them with the ensemble. Ensemble members were her first audience. She described the experience as “hearing other people hear her” and it provided her tremendous affirmation.

Sweetness: I remember when I wrote things down, I just wrote to release it, not to dare to read it. It wasn't until I sat at the table with TSC you know, [and someone asked], well who's gonna read [what they wrote]? What? No, I'm just releasing it. I'm just releasing it.

And then you know, to hear myself read it, and then hear other people hear it...you can hear me. [Y]ou feel me...so it's like, oh, wow, it actually makes sense outside of my head.

Beth: I love that. That [you] hear other people hear it...that phrase. I think that's really a powerful experience.

Sweetness: That was my experience...oh, you hear it.

Arlene: Yeah, that's deep. That's deep, Sweetness.

Sweetness was not sure what her writing would convey to others until she heard how it affected ensemble members once she read her writing aloud. This helped her know that she was communicating her ideas effectively and skillfully.

Family-like Relationships and Love Undergird a Shared Commitment

The sisterhood and deep bonds that formed from this process of community building are now indispensable to almost all ensemble members' well-being. Of her TSC sisters, an ensemble member said during a talk-back: "I don't really like all of them, but I love them all." The same ensemble member referred to TSC as TLC—tender loving care—during our entire interview.

The family-like unconditional support that a number of ensemble members experience is vital to their well-being. Linda Faye said of her TSC sisters during a post-performance discussion:

These are my sisters. This is my family. You know, my partner passed away in 2012. My mother passed in 2009. This is my support group. They help me stay clean, they help me stay focused and grounded.... I can call anyone of them. And we fight like cats and dogs; we're like real sisters, for real. We fought in the van

on the way here. (laughter) But the key to that is, there's nothing but love. We can fight one second, but the next second, it's like, we got each other's back—no matter what—like a jacket.

Sharon's description of her experience with the ensemble community shows an unconditional love, mutual respect, and support:

It was just giving each other love, sitting down, being able to talk about certain things, you know?... There's an ongoing forever continuous love that we have for one another...even if it's just to vent or to hear each other out, you know? And I think one of the most important pieces in my life is the support because when you go through things you always need someone...just have somebody there to say, I'm here you know, no matter what I'm here, that matters the most, you know?

I don't know what I would do without them, you know because that is a support system, you know? Not only do we lend our voice but we're a voice for each other, you know? We are therapeutic for one another. Now all of them might not be clinicians. There's a couple of us, a few of us, that are clinicians; however, we have that therapeutic way of just being there for one another so that helps us personally, a "you-for me" [we] have...that helps develop...your own inner backbone.... Not just one, it's a group, and each and every single one of them will support you in just hearing you out, and just crying with you....

Tami described her caring for and emotional connection to TSC as "a certain feeling" she gets from the ensemble based on a bond that centers on the shared experiences of surviving and thriving difficult and painful circumstances, not necessarily the same experiences, but a feeling that "we've all been through something."

Vivian's take is that TSC's bonds override commonplace interpersonal conflict that can break apart the average friendship and might even estrange family members from each other:

The level of past trauma that we've all experienced, though different, is very real and very deep and exposed in that group, and that's a bond. It's like soldiers who serve in a war together say, you know. That bond just does not go away, right, because there's just certain experiences that you know only people who have been through that understand it in a tangible way, and it's too much of a risk to lose that bond, because there's not a lot of spaces where you can find it.

Based on her own feeling about the group and what she sees it does for others, Vivian hypothesized that TSC's community is too valuable to let conflicts get in the way of maintaining this cohesive and supportive community. Ensemble members feel there is a high level of integrity within the group and a strict adherence to the aphorism, *whatever is said in the group stays within the group*.

Tami saw mutual admiration and affirmation as the base on which solidarity and group cohesion is built over time:

It happens every time we get together. You feel each other more, you understand each other more, you're more loving to each other, you're more caring, you're more, "Okay, tell me how is this goin', how is that goin'?" "Girl, we gotta add this piece, let me tell you the outcome we're going to add this to the story girl, what?" Yeah.

The mutual love and support process are bound up in the story creation and storytelling process. Much is gained for every member in participating in this process as a creator, sounding board, and supporter.

Tami built on Vivian's hypothesis by adding her own thoughts on why difference, friction, and conflict do not derail TSC:

When we have the same common goal, some of the stuff that you don't like, you're able to still work out [differences] because [of the commitment to] that goal....and that's the lesson that we all [learned]...these women are powerful.

That shared goal is multifaceted in actuality. Ensemble members feel committed to maintaining their supportive community. Building each other up and sharing their stories on stage to change the public narrative and reform justice system policies are among the most important goals of the ensemble members. These goals are also interrelated and dynamic.

During a post-performance discussion, Tataria shared with the audience that TSC has supported her throughout the ups and downs of life, and she is grateful for the love and caring she receives—and gives. She instructed the audience to find its own form of TSC because such a community is invaluable for one's well-being.

A Window on TSC's Creative Process

Focus groups are a commonplace method for qualitative research projects. For this research project, the focus group method was particularly well-suited because it was second nature for the ensemble members. While we were unable to find a time for everyone to meet in one focus group, we broke into three different focus groups based on ensemble members' availability. These focus groups provided a window into the group process and enabled ensemble members to feed off each other's ideas and energy, creating rich conversations that confirmed findings about the nature of the devising process as emotive, supportive, and generative.

Devising Tami's "Trauma, my grammar" Monologue

During our interview, Tami recalled the day she came to a TSC session after a particularly stressful day at work. Her supervisor, who often corrected her work writing, was exceptionally harsh that day. She shuddered at the memory of him going, in her words, "berserk" on her writing. The TSC session she attended following work focused on the topic of trauma as a writing prompt. "And I wrote," stated Tami. Then she went on:

My first sentence was 'Trauma, my grammar.' And that was like, oh my God, for it seemed like that might not be real trauma, but it was trauma for me that day because that man...used to humiliate me. Yeah, I had got trauma....

Well before that session, Tami's struggle with grammar became evident as soon as she joined CCF. She got by for many years without knowing how to write properly, although "I even lost a job because of my grammar." She did not realize that she had challenges with her grammatical abilities until it affected her performance at work and in higher education. CCF helped her overcome this challenge by providing her with tutoring.

When I went back to school my grammar was off the hook...I was writing, I mean everything, in the present...I had a professor that would just tear my paper up and I would cry. [laughs] ...they would be like, everything else is on point; your thoughts are good, you're passionate, everything is good but my grammar was out of whack.

At first, Tami doubted that the topic of grammar was a worthwhile direction for her writing. Vivian, who was at the session, read the piece and told Tami she thought she could go somewhere with the idea, encouraging her to write about her experience. This eventually became the TSC monologue "Trauma, my grammar" about Tami's struggle with—and eventual mastery of—grammar.

Trauma, my grammar
I before E except after C
I have
You have
He/she has
Past and present tense
Singular/Plural
I have to go back and revisit
You see!

Nouns, pronouns, verbs
Adverbs/adjectives
Conjunctions/prepositions
You must get it right
Or your supervisor or professor
Will edit, you see.

Words have power and order
 And you must place it right
 If you want to achieve.
 I needed extra help and
 Today my writing has improved
 You see.

Working on the monologue allowed Tami to process her past struggles and more recent achievements simultaneously, as well as take something that might have seemed light-hearted at first glance and turn it into something profound.

Tami's processing included revisiting the behaviors that prevented her from not learning grammar the first time around, when she was in high school. She remembered English classes full of unruly students and a teacher who failed to engage them, so Tami capitalized on the chaos and made jokes during class rather than pay attention. "I paid for that," she concluded. "And making scenes out of it [was helpful for me]...." The writing process allowed Tami to reflect on why she was able to succeed and take ownership over her education once she joined CCF: it was the support and role modeling she found at CCF that helped her overcome her educational challenges and self-doubts.

Tami also enjoyed the humor that she chose to employ in the monologue. Being able to show what she was genuinely experiencing as traumatic at that point in her life through a comedic lens was empowering: "It feels good because when people laugh at something, they're...identifying with you and [showing] they understand...." The affirmation is important to her, but she also strives to reach people in the audience who can relate to her story:

When we do that scene, especially if we talk to the people that have been through struggles...so most likely if you're in jail, you missed some English somewhere. So that scene [shows] if you want to get your life together, it'll be okay when you go to school and you have a couple of grammar problems. But that doesn't mean that you won't be able to succeed. 'Cause today I am

succeeding. Who would've known a person like me, a person who battled a drug addiction with a twelve-step program—because I hate to say it, you know, but that's my reality—has a master's today?

For Tami, her mastery of grammar was a step towards getting her to her current identity as a master's degree holder. Her educational trajectory signified the depth of her personal transformation. After prison, she started in a pre-GED program, progressing step by step from GED diploma holder to associate degree, then bachelor's, until she completed her master's degree. The beginning of her journey started from her lack of engagement in her education as much as it did from her drug use. Her substance abuse recovery process started with her exploration of self. When Tami became clean, she found that she was not sure of who she was, so the first part of her journey involved rebuilding her identity. This included engaging in activities that developed her self-esteem and integrity. Developing a belief in her ability to go to college and improve her grammar was equally as important to her identity shift as it was to her recovery process.

Tami continued to credit the women she met through CCF as inspirations, but it took time to develop the belief in her ability to achieve what they were achieving. It was a process. At first, she was dubious:

Yeah, like a master's, forget it. Go to college? Who, where, what? You know, like I had a little inkling that a GED was possible for me but not...college.... I never thought it would be me. For real, not from where I came from. *I never thought I would tell a story....*

Little by little, Tami's self-doubts washed away as she engaged more fully in CCF. She understood this evolution from doubting her ability to be a college student to earning her master's degree as writing her life story, her personal narrative. It seemed at first that her life would not progress forward. She lacked hope. But once she found hope through CCF and a belief in herself, she began writing her story, one degree at a time. This narrative is

the story of personal transformation. Performing stories of personal transformation is the bedrock of a TSC performance.

During one of the focus groups, Tami explained that she felt TSC is powerful because it is a forum for each ensemble member to share her own transformation. She pointed out that TSC performs “not just the negative but how people can overcome obstacles and pain and struggles.” She went on:

When you hear things that are [only] negative...like on the news, you just shut down..., but when you see us [perform the negative] through the theater group and then you see the positive come behind it.... That’s the difference when you do theater, when you hear about all of our stories have some type of negative.... We come across with our past stories, but then bring them up to date with our stories now.... They listen to you live, standing there saying, I did this....

Alesa wholeheartedly agreed, adding, “From the gutter to blossoming...when I look back on my life, coming from a church family...whhhooooohhhh...to where I went to, to where I’m at now...”

In addition to changing the way they saw themselves, ensemble members shared that the way their families and communities saw them also changed. This speaks to how combatting internalized stigma and developing self-confidence provide ensemble members with the strength to combat—and to challenge—external stigma. Linda Faye shared how her internal transformation eventually led to her family seeing her through a new lens. “[Before I was] the prodigal daughter, I was the one who robbed the person and everybody knew about it, and now I’m the one that everybody can go to, that they can trust.” Another ensemble member shared, “My uncle got sick and I was always his favorite niece, so he had me handle all of his business, and I knew that my cousins were yapping, *you know she’s robbing him.*” When he passed away, she presented to the family all of the bills she had reconciled and the carefully managed way she handled his

end-of-life wishes, proving that she met the level of her integrity her uncle had ascribed to her.

The conversation went on with Tami quoting a line from a scene that was usually delivered by Linda Faye:

Tami: So when we do this theater, it's like we show people that we can change. *People say, people ain't never gonna change....* I was raised in a church, so when I hit the streets they [judged me]...but when I changed my life around, I was the least one they thought [would change]. I was there for my mother, I brought my mother to my house when [she was dying]—my mother was like, you're going to be the one. And I would've thought it be my other sister.... She was the good sister.

Linda Faye: [You] made me think about this, you know, when my mother was in the hospital, she said, I was washing her for the first time, she said, you can see it on her face, she said, "Who would have thought it would be you?"

Tami: My mother took my hand, and she said...hook me up. Who knew it would've been you to take care of all those things? I already had the theater group. My life had totally changed. Even when I hear myself, when I go to my job...if they just knew the person I was before. I don't even believe I'm this person—and with the help of sisters. Even about trauma, as I said in one piece, "Trauma, my grammar" [several ensemble members say the line with her and they all laugh]. Who would have known at the time I was struggling? It was painful, but, like it could turn into a joke and could be laughter, but in the end I overcame it. This is awesome when you get your life together, you have help. Somebody can take your hand and show you how to do this....

Tami brought up how members of her church, her own mother, and even she herself doubted that she could change. Other ensemble members could relate to this experience, sharing their own stories of surprising family members—and themselves—with their newfound identities. They all proved the naysayers in their family and community—and even themselves—wrong.

Tami also spoke of joining TSC as a milestone in the story of her process of change. There are many milestones in her journey to building her new identity: going through recovery, developing a belief in herself, coming to terms with her past negative behaviors, becoming educated and a professional, taking care of her dying mother, and joining a support network that helped her work through her trauma. Processing her experiences of overcoming her challenges with grammar was part of building that change narrative and new identity. In this way, TSC's material generation process contributes to the continuous reconstructing and reimagining one's story.

The Devising of Arlene's "Mother" Monologue

Like Tami, Arlene was investigating a source of her trauma during a TSC session. The monologue writing and performing process had profound impacts on Arlene's ability to face a violent and dark part of her life that she had never disclosed to anyone until she wrote about it during a TSC writing session. Her monologue tells her story of being shot and left for dead by her partner, who was also her drug supplier and the father of her son. He then turned the gun on himself.

The softly lit bedroom was quiet and peaceful. My baby boy of eleven months was asleep next to me. I didn't want to return him quite yet to his beautifully decorated blue crib—not quite yet. I just wanted to gaze at his perfect little face, breathing peacefully. My first and only baby boy. When I heard the front door open, I stiffened and turned my back; I didn't want to see his face.

I heard my bedroom door open. I heard that nine-millimeter being cocked back. Three shots went off. I heard his voice: Don't worry, I'm gonna join you.

I heard a small, still voice within me say: Lie still.

I heard one more shot. A pause. I didn't move. Another shot. I heard his body fall to the floor.

Suddenly I heard my son crying. I hadn't heard him before. But suddenly I heard him. He was wailing. I turned and saw that he was covered with blood.

Later I learned that it was my blood that covered his body. I had been shot in my right wrist, my left arm, that a third bullet had entered my upper left torso and traveled to my neck.

Suddenly I heard the front door open again.

FULL-CAST STANDS

-Ma?

FULL-CAST FACES OUT

My seventeen-year-old daughter, who was supposed to be at movies. That was twenty-five years ago. My daughter saved my life that night.

Arlene said during her interview that she was committed to sharing her story with as many audiences as possible:

It's important for me to have women, especially, hear that monologue because I would like that no woman go through that. It's stuff that you have to catch early on, in relationships, you know. So if I can help somebody, I want them to hear my story.

Her harrowing monologue makes a tangible impact on the audience. Her proof: "I see people crying. I can see that. I can hear the sniffles."

When she is not telling her story on stage, Arlene recounts it at her job as an addiction counselor, in groups, and during one-on-one counseling sessions. She has told her story at church and to friends. She shares the story with any woman she comes into contact with that hints at or discloses that they are in abusive relationships.

When I'm talking to actual women that are where I was, it gives me the opportunity to really be raw with them...get down to the nitty gritty. I tell them the truth, I tell them straight out why I was with that man in the first place, which was that he was a drug dealer.... And it got to the point where he was my supplier and that was what held me to him. It was an unhealthy relationship to be sure. It was toxic. And so when I explained those kinds of things to them so they can identify. They do identify, whether they're stuck with their significant other because of drugs or because they support them, or because they're the baby's daddy.

It kind of helps them to see the very reason why they're stuck to that person. It helps them to think, to identify, that situation. Once they can, they're able to identify the very reason why they're there. It's like the song says, what's love got to do with it? Then they can have clarity, and then they can make a plan from that clarity, have some hope. Which is what I want to give them: hope. Hope that, you know, you don't have to stay there. You have options. And that gets the ball rolling....

Arlene uses her story as a tool to help women who are in abusive relationships to open up about their situations. She noticed that these women tend to minimize what they are going through, primarily because they feel guilt, shame, and despair. Her story helps women feel less alone and less ashamed, and, in turn, they open up and tell her their stories.

Today, Arlene is open to relating her story, but almost two decades passed between that traumatic night and the evening at a TSC session when she would write down the event for the very first time. Between those two evenings, she had not spoken to anyone about what she had endured:

Could I even describe that [night]? I had not...shared it in that way, with anyone, prior to that. Not even my family. Not even my daughter, who was in that story. Not my mother, no...one, I had never...shared it...with anyone. I'd never put it down on paper. Never done that. And in the beginning, it was kinda scary.

I asked Arlene what enabled her to finally write and speak about the event at a TSC session. She paused, then said:

That's a good question. Wow. We were in a place in Chinatown when that came out from inside of me, and I don't even remember what Beth...told us to write about. I couldn't even tell you. I remember the lights being down low, and I don't know what brought that out. Oh. The lights. Wow. I think the lighting in that room kinda took me back to the lighting in that room.... I've never made that connection. And then Beth helped me to...refine it.... Certain key words that she helped me to...focus on. One of them being "I heard," and that was very keen of her to pick up on that. Because a lot of it was about what I was hearing. That night. The sounds that I heard. So she helped me to develop it.

Creating the monologue was a good experience for Arlene, but once it came to rehearsing and performing, she found the process to be trying. She explained that during rehearsals, “I was shaking like a leaf. It was hard to get through it. It was very, very difficult.” She would often break down and cry. Another ensemble member was also rehearsing a harrowing monologue during that same time. “She would rehearse her story, she would cry...then I would rehearse my story and I would cry. We took turns.”

Sometimes Arlene would have to stop rehearsing her monologue if it was too painful to go through it on a particular day. Other ensemble members would also have similar experiences when they were not up to reliving their trauma during rehearsals. Beth explained that they developed a process for how to minimize the possibility of a rehearsal causing undue suffering:

There are times in rehearsal when we’ll be running through the show and...we get to the point where...someone has a monologue that’s dealing with a traumatic experience and...she’ll say the first and last lines of the monologue. She’ll give me a signal, like we’re not going to actually rehearse it. And I’m definitely more mindful about quote/unquote directing those monologues, depending on where the person is emotionally with it, because the first priority is to keep [ensemble members] safe....

This is an important facet of how TSC has evolved to cope with rehearsing material that has the possibility of retraumatizing ensemble members. Preserving ensemble members’ emotional well-being has evolved to become a priority for TSC. Theater is emotional labor, even for actors who do not perform their own stories of pain, and this must be taken into consideration, in particular, for the TSC ensemble. Without mechanisms to safeguard ensemble members’ welfare, the deeply felt trust and security that exist for almost every ensemble member would erode.

Rehearsing and performing her “Mother” monologue over the years has made it easier and easier for Arlene to tell her story without becoming too emotional to get through it. In fact, the repetition of her performance of “Mother” has been therapeutic for her. During one of the focus groups, Sweetness opened up a discussion about drawing out material from places of pain versus places of strength. (This focus group is lightly edited to pull out the thread about working from places of pain.)

Sweetness: We could benefit from coming from a place of healing and gratitude. We can benefit from that. We can share our stories without staying in the place of pain. This is a choice. Or you can continue to tell your stories from a place of pain. The choice is always yours.

Arlene: ...repeatedly going back to that pain I think is healing for me.

Sweetness: I’m saying the same thing, the more you tell the story, the further away from the pain you get. The choice will be yours. We have to choose to do that.

Arlene: Yeah, absolutely...but for me, the more I’ve done it...even in expressing the pain, the more I’ve done it, the more I’ve learned about myself, and the more I’ve healed.... And there was even... one rehearsal in which [a male guest director] was coaching us. And that brought a different element to my experience. Ooh, I get chills when I think about it...it brought a different dynamic. And when he got up to approach me, it was spooky.

Beth: Because he’s a man?

Arlene: Yeah. Big man, yeah, yeah.... It was spooky, you know? And it brought me back to that bedroom. [B]ut as spooky as it was, it helped me. You know, it helped me because in many ways, I was suppressing.... I think in my monologue I’m always like turned away.

Beth: Yeah.

Arlene: And I think subconsciously, you know, I wrote it that way, like I was always turned away. I didn’t want to look at him, you know? But then with [the guest director] in the room and him approaching me that way, it forced me to look at him.... After that performance,

I go home and I just lock it away again, but every time I do it, I can look at it. I can examine it. And sometimes you even remember something that I had locked away, even an emotion. That's what it is for me. That's what the healing is about. Being able to look at it, at something that I had locked away and didn't want to look at.

This conversation brought out how ensemble members process differently.

Sweetness started out the topic by suggesting that building strength can come from choosing to draw from places of healing and gratitude. I learned through her interview and seeing her interact with the group that Sweetness practices this way of approaching her own past. She reframes negative experiences by finding a way to appreciate what she learned or how she grew from those experiences, or how they helped send her on the pathway to a better place, i.e., to a place of freedom. Sharon also practices a similar way of approaching making sense of her past, saying that she does not regret any part of her life journey, even the "horrid" legs of the journey, because they took her to where she is today, i.e., a place where she has fulfilling relationships and engages in meaningful work. Arlene approaches her painful past very differently, choosing instead to peel it back like layers of an onion; with each layer peeled back, she experiences a step in the process of recovery, or, perhaps, a restoration of equanimity. TSC accommodates these different ways of working through trauma, and this shows a range of needs and practices that ensemble members can draw from for their healing and coping.

Arlene went on with the focus group topic, moving to a more painful place:

Arlene: Even though I've done it for audiences and for my peers, I've been selfish with it. I feel I've been selfish with it because I have opened up my box for people that are not related to me. My children have not seen it, my family have not seen it, my sisters have not seen it, have not heard it. So, I feel a little selfish with it, you know? Maybe in the future I can have the courage to maybe have the very daughter who saved me that night, if I could have the courage to let

her see, let her hear my monologue. That for me I think would further my healing.

Sweetness: There's a lot of work....

Arlene: Talk about pain, right? [she cries]

Sweetness: ...sometimes we think we're supposed to take it somewhere, but the work is here. It is here. It is here. [she pats her chest]

Arlene: Sorry, ladies...can I have a tissue?

Sweetness: ...because it's powerful. And we're learning how to share it, protect it...it lives inside of you.

In this part of the discussion, Sweetness, although she may approach her own pain differently, acknowledged the intensity of Arlene's emotion. She practiced compassion during her interaction. When Arlene started crying, Sweetness affirmed the emotions that Arlene was experiencing ("we're learning how to share it, protect it..."). By using "we," she joined Arlene in the emotion—in essence, finding common ground. This gives us a glimpse at the ways in which the ensemble members approach trauma and difference by recognizing each other's pain and processing. It came up on many occasions that sometimes ensemble members have conflicts during rehearsals, so it is not always a smooth process. In fact, some ensemble members cited disagreements as being fairly commonplace. However, most of the ensemble members shared that disagreements never fractured the cohesiveness of the ensemble.

The second aspect of this exchange that is important is that the ensemble members' experience of the performance changes depending on who is in the room. Arlene found that she does not yet have the strength to perform her monologue for her family, yet she found it empowering to perform it for women who have experienced abusive relationships because she sees that sharing her story opens up an opportunity for

them to begin their own journey to healing. In this way, sharing her story is healing for her because it is healing for the women for whom she performs. Performing for her family places her in a vulnerable position. Several ensemble members have shared that they hesitate to perform in front of family or people they know well, whether colleagues or friends. Others have invited family members to performances on many occasions and find having their loved ones in the audience to make them feel supported.

The creation of these two monologues, “Trauma, my grammar” and “Mother,” was nurtured by the trust that ensemble members have built over the years. The conversations and emotions that run throughout group sessions place ensemble members in vulnerable positions. While some of these emotionally charged sessions may not result in a scene or monologue, they almost always help ensemble members gain new insights into themselves and their worlds.

A Glimpse Into the Seeding of Nascent Ideas

One of the focus groups that we held for this project provided a window on TSC’s bonding and how this was part of their creative process. Although most of the focus groups were centered on the research project, ensemble members interacted much in the same way they did when I attended a rehearsal or accompanied them on a trip to an out-of-state performance. There was a lot of joking and laughter, catching up on family (especially the latest on kids, grandkids, nieces, and nephews), and sharing what was new at work and how mutual friends and colleagues were doing. According to the ensemble members, conversations naturally turned to sharing ongoing challenges and processing experiences. It was easy to see how a range of emotions came out during these sessions.

During this particular focus group, one of the strands that surfaced was that performing their personal stories in front of strangers was sometimes easier than sharing their stories with their loved ones, friends, or colleagues. Out of the blue, Alesa started to tell a story about getting pulled over while she was driving. “I’m thinking I just going to get a ticket, I didn’t know my license was suspended.” It turns out that paperwork she needed to tend to was sent to a former address, so she was unaware of an old assessment on a ticket she had not paid, and therefore she was unaware that she had been driving with a suspended license until she got pulled over. The police arrested her, and she had to go to court. She told the group, “The White cop wanted so badly to put me in handcuffs...” Recalling what happened next made her choke up: “I’m getting emotional now.” She was appointed an attorney by the court who treated her rudely. Alesa recalled, “She said, you’re acting like you are new to this, you’ve been locked up so many times.”

Vivian: Oh my god, that was your attorney?

Alesa: That was the appointed attorney. I wanted to cry because I’m saying to myself, look...she gave me a recall and made me sit until after lunchtime because all I was going to do was ask her, was this going to go on my record. She was telling me I had to plead guilty. You can’t just tell me to plead guilty.

Alesa explained why she did not want to plead guilty: it was not her fault she was unaware that she needed to supply additional paperwork and pay additional fines.

Vivian: That’s a script right there.

Alesa: I couldn’t say nothing because I was embarrassed....

Denise: That’s humiliating.

Alesa: I was saying to myself, are you kidding me?

Alesa continued to share her feelings of shame and that she was dismayed by the callousness of her attorney, particularly given that she had not been in prison since 1999. A conversation ensued about being able to relate to Alesa's story, with another ensemble member sharing: "Please, I've been out of prison for fifteen years and I still get nervous when a cop is anywhere near me.... If I get picked up for even jaywalking, if they run my record, they're going to throw me in a category...like that attorney did to you...."

Another ensemble member recalled being disrespected by a parole officer who was dubious that she had changed her life: "...the parole officer, do you know what she said to me? She said, so what's different now?" even after looking at a file that listed her degrees (including a master's), a stable job for 15 years during which time she had been promoted, and glowing references from professors and the executive director of her agency.

Vivian: That's the type of person who should be in our audiences, so they can check themselves. You're making judgments about people who you don't even know.

Tami: Sometimes I want to ask people, do you know what I've been through? And what I overcame?

This exchange was a small part of the focus group, yet, even within a few minutes of a conversation that went off topic, it shows a glimpse into TSC's process. Scenes can develop through the sharing of what happens in ensemble members' daily lives. Vivian even verbalized that Alesa's experience had the makings of a scene when she said, "There's a script right there."

Ensemble members could relate to how Alesa felt when her court-appointed attorney humiliated her. They could relate to the fear of having to interact with the policing and court systems. These fears were grounded in past experiences of interacting

with these systems. They were grounded in the suspicion with which they were regarded on a daily basis. Several ensemble members told me during interviews and focus groups that they wanted their audiences to understand their scenes and monologues are vivid examples of how they experienced policies of exclusion, living with trauma, and the collateral consequences of reentry every day. How the audience receives and interacts with a TSC performance is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter VIII

TSC'S TALK-BACKS: AN EXTENSION OF THE PERFORMANCE

Exploring the Concept of the Theater Talk-Back

Inherent in theater is storytelling in front of a live audience. Since TSC's goal is to "change hearts and minds," it aims to influence the individuals who attend the shows to become part of their social movement to end mass incarceration. While Chapter VI focused on the content and messages of a TSC performance, this chapter delves into post-performance discussions that are an integral part of a TSC show. The audience's engagement in post-performance discussions becomes part of the dialogic process of social movement building.

Beth referred to post-performance discussions as "talk-backs," a term that is used in professional theater circles. In the theater world, a talk-back is a time put aside following the performance when the audience is invited to discuss the play with the actors, the director, and/or the playwright. In professional theater, some professionals have disdain for talk-backs (David Mamet famously will not allow talk-backs within 2 hours of a performance of his plays and will go as far as fining a theater that permits a talk-back), while some enjoy talk-backs because they allow audiences to participate in a dialogue with and give feedback to the creative team (Miller, 2017).

Talk-backs are a common tool for socially engaged theater artists. The talk-backs are viewed in this community as a form of civic engagement and public education. The Ford Foundation funded Americans for the Arts to document artists and arts organizations engaging in civic dialogue, a form of talk-back that cultivates dialogue between the audience, the arts piece, and artists around social issues. The result of the study was published in a report in 1999 called “Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue” (Bacon, Yuen, & Korza, 1999). Performer and playwright Anna Deavere Smith served as artistic advisor for the project, which presented her theater and audience engagement practices as illustrative of how artists are exploring the power and value of arts-based civic dialogue. Smith’s theater pieces focus on subjects such as structural racism and inter-ethnic conflict. Some of Smith’s civic dialogues have included workshops that provided background on concepts and issues before performances with talk-backs following, as well as educator guides for teachers bringing students to the performances.

The report defined arts-based civic dialogue as “cultural projects in which the primary intent of dialogue is to focus on a civic issue” that engenders “multiple perspectives on an issue...as a basis for discussion, either through the art presentation itself or as a deliberate aspect of the dialogue” (p. 12). Theater scholar Jan Cohen-Cruz wrote that “the civic-dialogue model is an effort to engage the public more fully with contemporary issues. It is reminiscent of 1960s theater, but from multiple perspectives, a key contribution of community-based theater” (p. 106). Cohen-Cruz similarly pointed out that arts-based civic dialogue consciously cultivates a diversity of voices. From this perspective, the artist’s intent is to instigate dissent, different points of view, and conflict

in a public space, with the art piece serving as a means to inspire and inform this dialogue.

Another example, the American Festival Project, employs dialogues in its theater projects to “take on divisive issues in cities and towns across the United States.”

According to Linda Frye Burnham (2000), “The AFP thinks of itself as a cultural organizing tool, working with each of these communities to create an arts project that will leave lasting social change in its wake” (p. 75). For social change advocates, bringing diverse voices into dialogue and organizing are core strategies. For those engaged in cultural production for social change, arts can be employed to engage more deeply in dialogue and move people to action. As shown here, TSC’s talk-backs are rich experiences for ensemble members and for their audiences.

TSC’s Style of Talk-Backs

I return to the Lycoming College performance of *The Letters Behind My Name* to explore TSC’s talk-back themes. The audience at this performance was made up of students, staff, and faculty—the primary audience that attends TSC’s performances at colleges and universities. Also in the audience was a judge, community members, and formerly incarcerated people, as well as the individuals who were supporting them during their transition home. This audience represented a microcosm of the stakeholders that TSC aims to influence: leaders in the justice system, researchers and policy analysts, professional artists and artists-in-training, young college students interested in advocacy and social justice, community members, and people directly impacted by justice system policies and practices.

The talk-back discussion that followed the Lycoming performance began with the performers introducing themselves again: their names, their degrees (i.e., reiterating “the letters behind their names”), the fields or organizations they work for, and other aspects of their identities that they wished to share with the audience. For example: “My name is Linda Faye.... Obviously I’m a Master in Social Work,” referring back to her monologue when she mentioned that she held an MSW. “Tataria, I’m the loud one. I’m the Director of Operations for [a reentry organization]. I’ve celebrated twenty-four years of freedom. And I’m an alumni [sic] of College and Community Fellowship.” The audience broke into laughter when Tataria referred to herself as “the loud one.” “Hello, my name is Sister X and I work with the mentally ill. I am an alumna, as well, of College and Community Fellowship. And I am also a career student so I’m contemplating now working on my PhD.” The members of the ensemble often introduce themselves as CCF alumnae, emphasizing the importance of this aspect of their shared identities and common experiences.

Beth also introduced herself as TSC’s artistic director, explaining to the audience:

As you’re hearing, everyone in this theater group is involved with advocacy, social services, and reentry services, and they’re working to help people who are coming back into the community. They all have full-time jobs doing this [work] and they are so committed: they make time to come to rehearsals, they take time off to come do these shows. I think that informs the work and adds a lot to the material.

After these introductions, the audience was invited to ask questions and give their comments. A woman timidly introduced herself, and then added, “And I’m an ex-criminal.” She explained that there are not nearly as many services in Pennsylvania that help women reintegrate as there are in New York City. “Here in PA, some of us women don’t know how [to successfully reenter].... Can we get the resources to start programs

like you have in New York?” She ended her question with a request: “We need your help.” Consultation and mentoring between some of the TSC members and the formerly incarcerated women commenced immediately, in real time, in front of the audience.

Tataria suggested that groups who want to support formerly incarcerated women look into and apply for state grants, speak to their elected officials, and contact criminal justice system commissioners with suggestions for providing dedicated gender-responsive services and resources.

The following is a second example of Tataria connecting to another formerly incarcerated woman in the audience at the Lycoming talk-back:

Tataria asks another formerly incarcerated woman in the audience how long she has been home.

Audience member: I’ve done a total of twelve years in a state penitentiary.

Tataria: How long have you been out?

Audience member: How long? (laughs, nervously) Which time?

Tataria: This time.

Audience member: This time...I’ve been out since July 2011...

Tataria: So, what’s your name?

Audience member: Virginia.

Tataria: So...“Hi, My name is Virginia, and I’ve been free since 2011.” We don’t identify with the time in. We identify with the time out.

Tataria showed Virginia how to flip the deficits narrative of defining herself by her time in prison to an affirmative narrative celebrating her freedom, just as Tataria did when she introduced herself as celebrating “24 years of freedom.” The audience audibly supported Tataria’s interaction with Virginia with audible enthusiasm, “hmmms” and “uh huhs.”

When the ensemble states their names and degrees, Tataria also frequently adds to the end scene of *The Letters Behind My Name* the self-moniker of “ambassador of freedom.”

Once again, we see that TSC’s theory of change to combat social stigma and reframe the narrative begins with an internal shift where one recognizes and celebrates one’s self-worth. During the talk-back, Tataria served as an “ambassador of freedom” by modeling this affirmative narrative in both the performance and in the post-performance discussion. She was providing real-time advice to a formerly incarcerated woman, showing her how to reframe her thinking about her reentry. Second, with Tataria doing this on stage, audiences could see how to engage mentoring, modeling, and professional counseling. The talk-back is an opportunity to model how to engage in peer-to-peer support. It also shows the audience the invaluable nature of the power of formerly incarcerated leaders in leading change. The talk-back also provides a space for the ensemble members to demonstrate how they apply their values and expand their collective to include other formerly incarcerated people. The talk-back becomes a way for TSC, in essence, to expand the ensemble.

When another audience member asked about how the women got into theater, Linda Faye responded with what motivated her to perform her personal stories through theater:

It is very important for us to share [our stories] with people who are currently going through this.... You heard what we said, these are true stories, [this is] how we feel. Women...go through what I’ve gone through in my life. Trauma—that plays a big part in who we are and how we see ourselves. So sometimes that’s the bump in the road that doesn’t allow us to move forward. [We show that] women can get through it and address that trauma and seek...higher education so we can go and find better places to work at, become a better person. It allows us to get through the trauma, build up our self-esteem.... [W]hen I became a program director...they gave me the largest building in the agency. Go figure! Who thought? “People used to look at me like I was never going to be nothing.”

Linda Faye quoted from her own monologue in this last sentence, showing how societal messages of her worthlessness got into her head and created self-doubts. She continued with the following thoughts on how “[theater] allows for us to show society that you don’t have to stigmatize this population anymore”:

So at the end of the day, it’s to show society that it’s right to drop “the box.” The agency that I worked for dropped the box last week, they took the box off, they don’t ask the question, “Have you ever committed a felony?” [on their job application].... [A] huge agency dropped the box. Major. Major! We’re trying to get into colleges so they can [drop the box] on the Pell, TAP, applications...

Linda Faye provided eliminating “the box” on employment applications (asking if applicants have a criminal record) as a concrete example of how TSC’s advocacy works to humanize formerly incarcerated women in order to change policies that limit their opportunities for advancement. According to the National Employment Law Project, research has demonstrated that some employers throw out applications that have the box checked, never giving the applicant an opportunity to show her value and skills. While discrimination in employment is widespread for people with criminal records, research has also shown that cities and states implementing fair-chance employment practices, such as banning the box on employment applications, that make it illegal for employers to discriminate against people with records are effective (National Employment Law Project, 2016). Thirty-five states and more than 150 counties and municipalities have now “banned the box,” making it illegal to ask about one’s criminal history until the application process is coming to a close (Avery, 2019). Linda Faye spoke to the concrete effects of advocacy work that she has done at her own place of employment to change her agency’s perception of formerly incarcerated people. Her agency has actively recognized her worth and value by promoting her to a senior management position. The formerly

incarcerated people's movement against discrimination in reentry has achieved other successes as well and continues to organize for more policy change.

Tataria's and Linda Faye's responses to audience questions showed that TSC's choice of language is deliberate and consistent. How they choose to represent themselves through language and performance is carefully cultivated. This becomes a powerful tool for self-representation and transforming and controlling the public narrative of formerly incarcerated people.

During the talk-back, the ensemble speaks from both personal and professional authority and expertise. For example, the formerly incarcerated woman in the audience said that she was having a hard time finding a job, even after having participated in reentry programs offered by a local community-based organization. She said she is aware that education is necessary but is struggling to pay her bills. Linda Faye advised her to take it one step at a time so as not to become overwhelmed. She also offered her advice based on her own personal experience starting as a receptionist during the overnight shift at her current organization. She went to school and worked her way up at the same time. Linda Faye suggested seeing every small opening for employment as an opportunity to gain experience and improve her situation. This is important for formerly incarcerated women who are just starting out their journeys to hear that successful formerly incarcerated women were in similar positions.

Cheryl sees TSC as a form of mentoring for people just starting reentry, as well as expertise that reentry organizations need to support successful reentry:

We're kind of an authority on the topic...of reentry, of pursuing college upon reentry, on overcoming barriers that criminal records may pose. [Y]ou're going to listen to us [if you're] a person coming home, but also if you are running an organization, you're going to listen to us because [we have] been...successful in

that. That's why there's so many formerly incarcerated people in positions now in these organizations because they have walked the walk and overcome a lot of different barriers.

Audience questions confirmed Cheryl's observations that ensemble members are viewed as authorities in reentry. Audiences typically ask for TSC's opinions, experiences, and assessment, both from professional and personal points of view. At Lycoming, an audience member asked the ensemble, "What would your ideal reentry program be?" Sister X responded that it would be to provide housing, job training or education, and access to jobs. Tami added that her successful reentry was just as much about the peer support she received from her TSC sisters and the support that she gives to others who she feels is part of her community.

Along those same lines, during a talk-back at a different venue with an audience that appeared more well-versed in the reentry barriers faced by formerly incarcerated people, an audience member asked how CCF sustains engagement with the women they serve, noting, "I think so many people try to be supportive but miss the mark in all sorts of ways, and I would love to know what makes the [CCF] program, the [theater] group and the community really speak to you and keep you engaged."

Three ensemble members responded from different perspectives to provide a multifaceted answer. Sweetness shared that she felt that almost every aspect of CCF and TSC is led by or in service of formerly incarcerated women: "for me, that is a part of the cohesiveness." Similar to what Tami explained about TSC as a family that builds community, Linda Faye spoke of the unconditional support she felt within the space of TSC, as shared in Chapter VII:

This is my support group. They help me stay clean, they help me stay focused and grounded. I can call anyone—and we have a larger theater group—and I can call anyone of them. And we fight like cats and dogs; we're like real sisters, for real.

Finally, Vivian responded from the perspective of the CCF leadership:

The reason we're called College and Community Fellowship...is because we really believe in those principles that we are community and there is a real fellowship among us.... [W]hat really makes CCF work is the sisterhood. If I was to bring in professional staff to implement all of those programs, it would take away that sisterhood element. It wouldn't work. And that's what I try to make my staff understand all the time is that the greatest resource that we have as an organization is the women we serve because they are providing amongst themselves more social capital than we can ever offer them. They are their own resource, and we need to honor that. And that's what makes us work.

Vivian's response confirmed that sisterhood bond is one of the most significant strategies employed by CCF. Vivian noted that the sisterhood affords its members access to tremendous social capital. Importantly, Vivian was involved in a research study that she co-authored with Professor Susan Sturm (2015) from Columbia Law School's Center for Institutional and Social Change, and for which I conducted a number of interviews, on the ways in which the women of CCF developed and extended social capital to help themselves and their families (including family-like relationships) to access and succeed in education. The study, "Homegrown Social Capital," explained that social capital is

the resources people derive from relationships, and it is transmitted through formal and informal networks of individuals who provide information and access to opportunity, and who convey social norms. These networks enable individuals to access economic resources, increase their cultural capital through contacts with experts, and access institutional resources and opportunities. Education profoundly affects—and is affected by—access to social capital. Relationships provide the information, developmental opportunities, and social supports needed to navigate the educational pathway. (pp. 4-5)

The study found that the social capital that CCF fellows access and bring to their families and communities is multidirectional, flowing in and out of CCF, and benefits the multiple

generations of the families and communities in which fellows are embedded. TSC is an example of a community of support that generates and connects its members to multiple networks of resources, information, and support because of the personal, educational, professional, advocacy, and faith-based communities that members occupy, all due to their robust relationships. In fact, the report cover featured a picture of a TSC performance that included the children and grandchildren of TSC members.

Taken together, the three responses about what keeps CCF and TSC members engaged provided a substantive look at the elements of a successful reentry program like CCF and the role that TSC plays in creating a family-like community of unconditional support, which were recurring themes throughout this dissertation project. First, they speak to the importance of a reentry organization and programs that support the peer-to-peer spaces and the leadership of formerly incarcerated people. Second, they speak to the kind of support that TSC enables—a sisterhood and a family-like environment that help its members through both the trying and rewarding points and milestones in their lives. This sisterhood is bound by the shared experience of trauma on one hand—surviving prison, racism, gender and sexuality issues, growing up in communities of color, and so on. On the other hand, ensemble members are bound by the shared experience of overcoming the “rough, rugged, horrid road” (per Sharon) to success and achievement. These shared experiences forge an unshakeable bond. Finally, TSC also supports the development of capabilities—in this case, social capital and leadership development, educational and professional success—which have been documented as successful strategies for personal transformation.

TSC's talk-backs can be viewed as a part, rather than an addition to or as separate from, the performance of *The Letters Behind My Name*. The talk-backs are themselves performances, albeit a different type of performance. As seen above, TSC performs different types of expertise. The TSC members are experts in their own life journeys, adding a layer of reflection onto their scenes and monologues. They are experts in navigating reentry and in helping others who come after them to navigate the structural constraints in order to achieve their goals. They are professionals in reentry, education, human and social services, and research. Finally, they are experts in modeling the building of the formerly incarcerated people-led social movement. This multilayered expertise provides insights into policymaking that are not available to people who are not personally impacted by the justice system and are not from communities ravaged by mass incarceration. The following two examples of audience questions about policy shifts enabled ensemble members to respond from this place of multilayered expertise.

At one university talk-back, an audience member asked the ensemble: "I was wondering if you could talk about any dreams you've had of alternatives to the prison system." Vivian responded that she fully embraces decarceration, but she chose to reframe the question around what public safety, instead of focusing on the prison system, should look like from her perspective:

When I close my eyes and I think about public safety, I don't think about police departments that are equipped with armored vehicles rolling down the streets of Ferguson.... What I imagine...is communities that have well-equipped schools, where everybody can learn, and where teachers have good relationships with students and parents, and where children are safe. When I think about public safety, I think about communities where everyone has a decent place to live and good quality healthy food to eat and where everybody could find a living wage job and there's a park in every neighborhood. Those are the things that I think about when I think of public safety. So I don't really think about public safety in

terms of prisons or not. I think about it in terms of what healthy and good things do we offer our communities.

Vivian's definition of public safety is line with what Gilmore (2007) wrote about the institutional, economic, and social entrenchment of prisons—namely, that prisons have been built over the decades to “undermine rather than stabilize everyday lives everywhere,” and that the underlying motivation to expand the prison system was “to solve social, political, and economic problems” (p. 242). Gilmore warned movement builders that prison reform can reinforce the prison system because it works within the existing assumptions of the prison system structures. Vivian is a social change agent who fully embraces Gilmore's theory of change. She imagines a radically different set of conditions to enable communities most ravaged by the prison system to transform into healthy, nurturing, and productive places in which to live, go to school, and work.

At another university talk-back, an audience member who was a policy student observed: “I definitely know that we need to study the history so that we don't repeat the same mistakes, that we pay attention and listen to and make sure that we involve formerly incarcerated persons in the process of creating the laws...we don't, unfortunately, get that real experience in the classroom.” She then asked TSC members what they would recommend be taught in policy classes about how to dismantle mass incarceration.

One of the ensemble members provided the audience member with the following example of how policies can be designed simultaneously to address the deficits as well as to build the assets of a community. At the time, as part of her work on a national advisory board dedicated to stemming intergenerational poverty, she had been researching socioeconomic and community health conditions in East New York, a neighborhood with

one of the lowest incomes in New York City and a very high rate of people returning there after prison. She shared with the audience:

[In East New York] I found that there's a high rate of obesity...we have a high infant death rate, we have a high prevalence [of new cases of HIV]...we have the high incarceration [rates], we have high [rates of] diabetes, so all in that same area. [S]o a policymaker, to me, would want to pour into those catchment areas where there's such a deficit of supports for individuals who are suffering from not just incarceration but everything that piles upon it. [T]he other thing is that there's no college in that community.... I think that it would be one of the answers as a policymaker...starting from the beginning with pre-incarceration and have some healthy stuff going on in that community.

Her original starting point was a focus on a community that has been deeply affected by mass incarceration (East New York is one of the neighborhoods cited in Ellis and colleagues' 1979 Seven Neighborhood Study); it is therefore little wonder that the community suffers intergenerational poverty. The ensemble member advised, first, to look at all of the factors that keep East New York from being a healthy community. With its lack of resources and health crises in the community, she advised taking a holistic approach to providing services to overcome those deficits. But at the same time, she recommended creating a policy that builds the assets of that neighborhood right in the heart of the community: to create a community college to serve that neighborhood. This ensemble member, who is a leader professionally and sits on national and organizational advisory boards, advocates for higher education access at every opportunity, stating at one TSC talk-back, "What this group stands for is education because without education you can't do anything." If she is at the proverbial powerbroker table, she would ensure that higher education was part of any policy agenda.

Because TSC talk-backs are a forum for exercising this multilayered expertise, they enable interactions and connections that lead to action. One powerful example of

this occurred during a talk-back at a college in Massachusetts. A woman in the audience shared a story of a formerly incarcerated man she was working with at a local community college who had a 4.0 grade point average and was invited to apply for Phi Beta Kappa by his college, but was rejected by the honor society. She felt he was rejected unfairly, remarking, “He is about as good a citizen as anybody I know....” She asked who might be able to help her put pressure on Phi Beta Kappa to reverse its decision. Vivian had performed and was now participating in the talk-back. Upon hearing this story, she informed the audience:

Part of the work we do at College and Community Fellowship is that we house a coalition called the Education from the Inside Out Coalition. Our current campaigns are a national campaign to restore Pell Grant eligibility to incarcerated students and a statewide campaign to restore state grants to students who are incarcerated in New York State. And we also have a national campaign to remove the criminal convictions screening question from the common application, and a campaign to—and we actually have legislation pending in New York—to ban any higher education institution in New York State from asking about criminal convictions prior to qualifying students for admissions to colleges. So we would be very happy to take on the honor organizations as well. This is what we do.... I would be very happy to bring this back to our team at the Education from the Inside Out Coalition and talk about how we could join with your team to add this to a list of our campaigns. Yes, is the answer.

The audience cheered at Vivian’s affirmative response. Not only was an alliance formed between advocates in different states at this talk-back, but it took place in a public forum, modeling movement and alliance building in real time.

While the Education from the Inside Out Coalition has disbanded, CCF continues to strengthen its advocacy work year by year in new forms of advocacy work and campaigns. Having the Executive Director of CCF on stage, speaking from multiple perspectives—as a movement leader, as the executive director of an organization that developed an effective strategy to empower formerly incarcerated women, and as a

formerly incarcerated woman whose life was transformed through education—demonstrates TSC’s power. At the same time, audience members influence the direction of the talk-back-cum-performance through the questions they ask. The audience becomes part of the civic dialogue process, which is a vital part of social movement building.

Eyerman and Jamison’s (1991) understanding of social movements as “a cognitive territory, a new conceptual space that is filled by a dynamic interaction between different groups and organizations,” resonates here. TSC’s talk-backs have created a unique cognitive and conceptual space. It is not often that the people in TSC’s audiences—students, academics, advocates, policymakers, mental health practitioners, social services providers—come together with formerly incarcerated people on equal terms. At a TSC performance, the members command the stage and center the dialogue around their life stories. However, there is also an overlap in identity between ensemble members and their audiences because TSC members are also students, academics, advocates, mental health practitioners, and social services providers, and, while not policymakers, some ensemble members have been or are national policy advisors. TSC talk-backs are spaces where expertise is redefined, with the multilayered identities of formerly incarcerated leaders and professionals at the center of social-movement building space.

Chapter IX

THE PERFORMANCE OF A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

TSC's Public Narrative

In the previous chapters, I discussed the catalysts for ensemble members to develop their critical consciousness and capabilities, the ethos of their collective, and the ensemble way of working that nurtures them to redefine their paths and reimagine their futures. All of these opportunities and spaces are iterative and reinforce each other, providing TSC members the ability to look back at their trajectories after prison and to develop agency to change their lives and the contexts in which their presents and futures are being shaped. The creative process itself is instrumental in helping them to reshape their identities and create a community based on love and compassion, and this reimagined self and the strength of their community have changed the ways in which they approach navigating their contexts. They are no longer bound by an imposed, socially constructed narrative that dictates the identities, worth, and futures of formerly incarcerated women. This has given them the confidence to advocate for themselves personally as well as for their communities.

Significantly, ensemble members have also been instrumental in actually changing their larger contexts, thanks to this newfound confidence and ability to self-advocate. For example, Linda Faye was responsible for “the box” being removed from

the job application at her place of employment; Vivian and Cheryl have been actively engaged in campaigns to remove “the box” from college and employment applications; and Sister X and Tataria have secured managerial positions with the City of New York—no easy feat for people with criminal records. Their personal, advocacy, and professional successes have changed their contexts. Engaging in higher education and the CCF community and devising theater material have helped them gain the confidence, language, and skills to become involved in this change work. Theater has provided them a public platform for performing this process of social change, both personal and contextual.

TSC chooses performance as its medium. While it is not necessarily traditional theater, TSC chooses to enact very intimate stories on stage and in public. As presented in Chapter VI, TSC’s former artistic Beth Mirarchi tapped into this quality the first time that she saw the group rehearse, reflecting that the “work felt radical, it felt like the performance art of that time...the stories that really needed to be told....” In seeing TSC perform, Beth experienced the ensemble conveying a sense of urgency to address the issues that plagued the reentry system.

Early in the process, some ensemble members remembered what might be characterized as a type of ambivalence about theater in the traditional sense. Vivian’s perspective was that the ensemble cohered more around their common desire “to have a voice...and they do think they have something to say.” The concept of voice is an important part of this research: the ensemble members all feel that theater gives them a voice and a platform for changing the terms of recognition of formerly incarcerated people. They also feel that their performances could inspire others to develop their own

voices. Voice is a tool to establish one's authority; to narrate the world through one's subjective experiences and expertise; and to make one's needs, wants, and desires known. It is the antithesis of the experience of imprisonment that erases or conceals one's identity, individuality, suffering, agency, and humanity.

The concept of voice vis-à-vis performance brings us back to the importance of audience, of performing in real time and face-to-face, unmediated. Voice in the performance context is the interaction of subjectivity and the external social world, per Madison (as cited in Winn, 2011). The performer is impacted by performing before an audience as much as audiences are impacted by the performers' personal stories. Being able to see the tears or hear the laughter of audience members connects to performers' voices and purposes in a way that writing or documentary films cannot. The audience becomes a necessary component of the performance art form. There is also a dialogic component of a performance that includes audience interactions as an extension of the performance.

From its inception, I aimed in this project to identify ensemble members' vision of justice, equity, and public safety. When I asked Tataria to describe the change she aimed to achieve through participation in TSC, she responded with a core value of love as sustenance for the empowerment for her community:

I want see women empowered. I want to see people not be ashamed of their past, and be able to stand up, speak it, say it, act it, write it, talk it, tell it and move forward. That's what I really want to see. And I want to see that Theater for Social Change be *TLC, tender loving care for other women who are coming through* and be able to be the catalyst to, you know, help them through the bumps and the clumps and I also would love to see it last forever.

Tataria and many other ensemble members saw their performances as direct lines to the hearts, souls, and psyches of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women and men.

They experienced that connection during performances and in discussions with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women following performances. Seeing the reactions of their audiences, notably tears and rapt attention, affirmed for the ensemble members that their performances were having a visceral impact on their audiences. TSC practices a type of public pedagogy, or, more familiarly, *public education*. This pedagogy is rooted in love for their community and the desire to see every single member achieve her or his dreams and to lead the movement to create the conditions for their community to experience liberation and freedom. It also represents their desire to be the inspiration and motivation to inspire and motivate women “coming up”—those still in prison, those in transition, those recently released, those suffering from the collateral consequences of mass incarceration. As Freire (1970) wrote of love in relation to pedagogy and social change:

Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. (p. 89)

During one talk-back, an audience member asked, “What was the hardest transition for everyone that is here, from being incarcerated to where you are now, and do you feel you have made that transition?” Tataria’s response demonstrated her unconditional support of the entire community of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people of color:

I’m not going to make the transition until everyone who is incarcerated—[whether] wrongly [incarcerated], mass incarceration—is overturned. Let’s overturn that. Let’s change some laws. I said this years ago [about] the laws that we have in place against people of color...so I don’t think that for me will ever be a transition until some of the movements that we have now and the momentum that we have as people of color changes [these laws].

She cited educational inequity for children, lack of access to education for adults inside and outside of prison, and intergenerational incarceration as the social injustices most

pressing for her community. Tataria's commitment to justice reminds me of an often-cited bell hooks (2000) quote, "There can be no love without justice" (p. 19).

Furthermore, hooks wrote, "Abuse and neglect negate love. Care and affirmation, the opposite of abuse and humiliation, are the foundation of love" (p. 22).

Tataria and many other ensemble members espouse the values and goals of the overarching social movement as the core of their motivation and commitment. They also bring to this movement the ethos of their collective—their shared identity and celebration of difference and diversity; the bonds of love, mutual respect, and healing; and the collaborative spirit that every member of their community has value in the ensemble and in the overarching social movement.

Sharon spoke of TSC's commitment to representation of the collective—both the ensemble as community and of the larger community of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women:

[TSC] is not even about friendship anymore. I mean, we're family. That's how we look at each other, you know? As family...not only do we stand tall together, but it brings the best out of us. [W]hen we go through our struggles individually, we [are] all still connected, and we still support each other.

It's not about us no more. It's about them...it's about those we're representing... 'cause it's never about us. It's never about I, right? It's about them...meaning the people who also are in the struggle.... We are putting out an awareness...this is a movement.... It's for the women.

Sharon sees TSC's collective personal storytelling as representing more than the individual members of the ensemble; TSC represents an entire community of formerly incarcerated women who care deeply for each other. To Sharon, TSC performs its collective public narrative in service of a social movement.

A TSC performance runs the gamut of human emotions and the reflection of being lived to its fullest: suffering, pride, anger, laughter, frustration, love, and catharsis. To a certain extent, these emotions transcend differences, such as the different ways in which experiences of race, ethnicity, language, gender, and so on, mediate one's world. For TSC, these emotions come out through the creation of TSC's material and then during the performances, connecting to and springing from the drive to represent its beloved community and the movement to end mass incarceration. These emotions and drives humanize the performers and the movement through connection to their audiences.

Marshall Ganz (2011) called for the employment of narrative and storytelling in social movement organizing in order to elicit emotional connection that leads to action.

He wrote:

Public narrative is a leadership practice of translating values into action. It is based on the fact that values are experienced emotionally. As such, they are sources of ends worthy of action and the capacity for action. Narrative is the discursive means we use to access values that equip us with the courage to make choices under conditions of uncertainty, to exercise agency. (p. 274)

Emotions have the potential to create a sense of urgency to tell, per Beth, "the stories that really [need] to be told." Ganz referred to this sense of urgency as the "story of now," i.e., why we need to make this change immediately. He urged movement leaders to articulate three forms of storytelling that connect to emotion and, ultimately, motivate people to act in order to create a new public narrative: story of self, story of us, and story of now. The story of self recounts how identity and lived experiences shape personal choices, challenges, and situations, and reveals why one's lived experiences calls one to engage in action. The story of us is the collective experience that precipitates a sense of solidarity

and shared values and experiences. The story of now provides the case for why people who feel motivated and moved to action should act at this particular point in history. TSC's storytelling very much fits into this framework; a TSC performance is the *public narrative of a social movement*. This partially explains why TSC is so effective: telling individual and collective stories and creating a sense of urgency can be a very effective strategy for social change.

As a live performance group, TSC's modality enables its members to live out their values and commitments as leaders, constructing the public narrative collectively and artistically as the social movement unfolds in real time. TSC is simultaneously a witness to and a reflection of the formerly incarcerated-led social movement as well as the impact of higher education and strengths-based, peer-led, healing and leadership-building programming. As the ensemble has been together for over a decade, their scripts have changed over time. They have progressed and developed individually and collectively, and their priorities concerning what to convey in their public narrative have changed to reflect their evolution. As active participants in their social movement, they bring the values and priorities of the movement into their lives, their work, their script development, and then onto the stage. The group members bring their personal experiences and the wisdom they have amassed over the five to six decades of their lives, as well as their collective experience as a long-term group, to their material and performances. Over time, they have changed the terms of their own recognition, as well as their larger community of formerly incarcerated people.

The Open-Endedness of the Performance Medium

One of the most significant aspects of *The Letters Behind My Name* and the talk-backs as a tool for narrating and enacting a social movement is that these can evolve and change over time. The performance, the scripts, and the talk-backs are all open-ended texts. As audiences change, so, too, do their questions and reactions, and this changes the nature of the civic dialogue. As the movement progresses, and as the social, political, and economic contexts change, the nature and themes of the civic dialogue of the talk-backs will also evolve.

Also, as TSC members' lives progress, the scripts can accommodate their life story changes, with the scripts integrating the most recent experiences of ensemble members. For example, Vivian was invited to be on a national reentry council during the Obama administration, a leadership accomplishment that the group incorporated into an existing scene. The members share new aspirations or accomplishments as they develop. When ensemble members graduate from new programs, they include the new letters behind their names in their performances. They also explore their future experience on stage, adding "future PhD" to the letters behind their names or telling the audience during a talk-back, "I'm contemplating now working on my master's." Whether this future comes to fruition for the ensemble members is not as important as that they are sharing their aspirations on stage publicly.

Tataria spoke of TSC's ability to go back to scenes or lines that have been written down but not used. She thought back to some of the writing she did for a scene that did not make it into a performance but that she felt now really resonates with the political

landscape during and after the election of Donald Trump. She reflected during her interview, “So that’s why writing is important, because even though we don’t use those lines, it is written, right? And we could always go back to it and get it [into a new script].” Older material can also serve as documentation of what was important to TSC over the years and of the evolution of the group. This adds another layer onto TSC; scripts are both open to additions and serve a preserver of the past thinking and ideas of the group. Both old and new material can be incorporated into TSC performances, making the performances timely, both personally for the performers and politically for the performers and audiences. I asked all the ensemble members who participated in the study what they would like to focus on in the future, and they responded with ideas such as exploring issues of mental health, aging prisoners, experiences of being in the military, and violence, to name a few. After having spent time seeing many different versions of *The Letters Behind My Name* and graduation performances, I found it very easy to imagine how the group could incorporate some of these ideas into their future work.

Winn’s (2011) concept of voice in performance as “a complex intersection of how one views him- or herself as well as how one is viewed by external forces” (p. 20) is particularly resonant. TSC is actively engaged through theater in influencing the way that external forces are viewing them. For instance, Sister X noted that she felt that performing gave her access to audiences, such as leaders and policymakers, to which she would not normally have access. This means that her performance is helping shape the perspectives of people who have the ability to shift policy and practice. In turn, this means she has the ability to influence the contexts that she and other formally incarcerated people are navigating on a daily basis.

TSC is not only working to reshape policy and practice through its advocacy, but it is changing the cultural and social discourses around what it means to be a formerly incarcerated woman in the United States in the 21st century. TSC is engaging in redefining and reshaping their contexts on multiple levels—personal, community, institutional, policy, and the public discourse. Patricia Hill Collins (1993) wrote that “people experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions” (p. 619). As this study showed, TSC is operating on these multiple levels. As it evolves personally, it becomes part of the collective that is influencing both community and context.

TSC is a powerful and unique art form because of the endurance of its collective. The TSC members perform their autobiographies, which change over time because they are committed to lifelong learning, professional achievement, and influencing policy and practices. As Nussbaum (2001) put it, these women are in command of what they can be and what they can do. The collective creation process documents this evolution and they now have a repertoire of scenes and monologues from each phase of their transformation from which they can draw. The changing nature of their autobiographies reflects the progress of the movement to replace the punitive justice system with healthy and restorative community practices and institutions.

The Performance of a Revolution: Lessons Learned From TSC

When I asked Vivian if she thought TSC could be distilled into a model that could be reproduced in other settings, she felt strongly that the answer was no. She said confidently that

there's never gonna be another TSC. It's like there's never gonna be another Sweet Honey In The Rock. There's something about those women being together and doing the thing that they're doing that is just not replicable.

TSC is indeed unique because their sisterhood, material and talk-back discussions are based on the lived experiences, career and leadership trajectories, and relationships of a particular group of women.

Art is not intended to be reproducible. In fact, artists strive to create works that are unlike any other in history. Yet the most impactful artistic works have deeply influenced other contemporary and future artists, culture, and society in immeasurable ways, often because works of art are inextricable from the zeitgeist of their eras. Theater and performance artists create a new and unique community and shared experiences every time they publicly perform.

Although there is a specificity to TSC's experiences navigating court, prison, and reentry systems, gender and racial discrimination, and other forms of inequality, there is also a universality that runs throughout TSC's script thematics and performances. In audience feedback forms and during talk-backs, audience members revealed they felt connections to the content of TSC's scenes and monologues—for example, the pain of rejection by family members, feelings of failure and external judgment, addiction struggles, the joys and heartache of mother-daughter relationships, and the difficulty of coming out as a lesbian. A TSC performance is one that runs the gamut of human

emotions: pain, shame, humor, pride, tenderness, and triumph. It is the ability of TSC to relate to its audiences on an emotional and visceral level that creates feelings of empathy, human connection, and solidarity. Through this performance of specificity and universality simultaneously, TSC succeeds in making an emotional impact on diverse audiences from different racial, gender, economic, and ethnic backgrounds.

TSC has succeeded in producing its own form of performance art fueled by and capturing the values, commitments, and strategies of the era where formerly incarcerated people are taking control over their own representation and shaping and leading the movement to end mass incarceration. It is the significance of these messages, values, and commitments in the lives of formerly incarcerated people that is being created in places like CCF and in TSC, and these are the conditions that should likewise be reproduced in other settings. Other groups of formerly incarcerated women, as well as men, should have access to opportunities for the full development of their capabilities in order to create their own form of theater; or to create their own volumes of poetry or fine arts; or to create community centers, afterschool programs, or new ideas, policies, and practices for the many different notions of justice. It is this self-definition and self-determination and ability to envision and then execute that vision that must be made portable, because this is what it means to become fully human. Depriving an entire population—the casualties and victims of an out-of-control mass punishment system—of these creative and leadership opportunities constitutes another grave injustice in a long history of racial, gender, and social injustices.

TSC and other movement leaders have cultivated an effective model for how to redress historic injustices. TSC has proven that, by reflecting meaningfully on itself and

on society; developing its members' self-efficacy, abilities, and collective voice; and employing that voice and their abilities in a supportive environment and in solidarity, they can live out their dreams and produce their own unique form of performance art. They have changed the terms of their recognition, they have charted their course for the capacity to aspire according to the needs of their community, and they have shifted the context in which they live, love, labor, and commune so that justice can be rendered and restored.

TSC is not a prescription for any one way to live out social change; there are infinite visions for what social change will look like when people have access to the tools, capabilities, relationships, and resources they need to live life fully. This study has crystalized TSC's vision, and this is what its performance of a social movement looks like. While Boal (1979) described theater as rehearsal for the revolution, TSC is not just rehearsing and preparing for the future. TSC is the performance of the revolution.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

TEACHERS COLLEGE

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
 INTERNATIONAL & TRANSCULTURAL STUDIES

Teachers College, Columbia University
 525 West 120th Street
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INFORMED CONSENT

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH: You are invited to participate in a research study **PERFORMING SPACES OF LIBERATION: COLLECTIVE STORYTELLING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**. This study focuses on how writing and performing as a Theater for Social Change (TSC) ensemble member impacts you both personally and professionally, as well as an activist, advocate, leader, and community member.

During one-on-one interviews and focus groups, I will ask you about how TSC's devised theater techniques enable you to share your personal stories of overcoming obstacles, working towards your educational and career aspirations, and celebrating your accomplishments. We will also explore how and why this type of community-based artistic expression is valuable for you, as well as why structural and institutional violence, education, aspirations, and leadership are among the key themes about which you write and perform and that arise during post-performance discussions.

Interviews and focus groups will take place at Columbia University, a conference room at College and Community Fellowship, or a convenient and private location of your choosing.

I will take notes during interviews and focus groups. I will also record your interviews and focus group discussions and make transcripts of the audio. This will include making transcripts of public post-performance public discussions that have been audiotaped. Making transcripts will enable me to go back and look for themes and patterns that emerged during our discussions and the post-performance discussions. I will also code and look for patterns in TSC's written scripts.

I will be the only researcher conducting these interviews and focus groups and looking through the transcriptions and written scripts.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: The risks associated with this study are minimal. You might experience some boredom or a lack of engagement at various points during the data collection, similar to what you might experience while participating in any other academic or community-based activities. You might experience some discomfort if sensitive subjects are raised during the interviews and/or group discussions.

During the interviews or focus groups, you will always have the right to decide not to discuss any specific aspect of your life or history, and will have the option of not answering any of the

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Teachers College, Columbia University Institutional Review Board Protocol Number: 15-411 Consent Form Approved Until: 08/31/2016

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Principal Investigator: Tammy Arnstein

Dissertation Title: Performing Spaces of Liberation: Collective Storytelling for Social Change (working title)

Unstructured Interview Protocol

1. How and why the member became involved in CCF and then TSC
2. How they understand their own interactions within the TSC ensemble
3. Impacts that being involved in TSC has on the member personally; professionally; as a leader in one's family and/or community; and in advocacy/social change
4. Discussion on the individually reimagined past-present-future trajectories that TSC members identify as informing their TSC work
 - Prompts: Consider how your educational identities and experiences, involvement in CCF, and your professional and personal lives become subjects of your writing.
5. The tools and identities that you bring from your membership in TSC to the following non-theatrical contexts:
 - professional lives
 - personal lives
 - in your communities
 - in leadership roles
 - other spaces/places
6. Changes that you strive to accomplish through TSC and (where applicable) CCF, and in one's work, family, community, and/or advocacy

Appendix C

Focus Group Protocol

Dissertation Title: Performing Spaces of Liberation: Collective Storytelling for Social Change

Unstructured Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Discussion 1

Ethical principles, project outcomes, timeline, and formalizing research partnership:

1. Discussion on ethical considerations, the group's expectations, and the principles of process to create an authentic collaboration that:
 - guarantees that all participants agree to and respect group ethical and participatory principles; and
 - will be reviewed regularly to ensure that each member of the collaborative feels safe, heard, respected, and able to express her perspective.
2. Products and outcomes: what do all participants want to produce from our collaborative research, in addition to the researcher producing her dissertation from the research results?
3. Review and update the project timeline (included at the end of this proposal) as regards the outcomes decided above
4. Formalize collaboration: discussion on how to formalize our partnership; ethics and principles; and products/outcomes of the project to which we agree
 - Options: Memorandum of Understanding; other establishment of a less formal set of guidelines that we sign or agree to orally; or a combination all of the aforementioned

Focus Group Discussion 2

1. Discussion of themes generated by analysis of scenes and post-performance discussions (TBD by thematic analysis process following IRB approval):
 - This will most likely include themes of structural violence, critical consciousness development, agency development, the role of dreaming, leadership, and advocacy efforts—themes that they enact and that transform them in some way
2. Conceptual framework themes
 - Enacting and performing the capacity to aspire
 - Writing and performing the past-present-future continuum (per Freire)

- Reimagination of institutions and society through development of Theater for Social Change's (TSC) social imagination and taking the steps toward their construction

Focus Group Discussion 3

1. Collective creation processes:
 - TSC's collective ethics and principles
 - TSC's artistic methods
2. Overarching goals and future of TSC
3. Defining TSC's "polemics-in-action" (per Syssoyeva, 2013), based on the above discussion topic outcomes